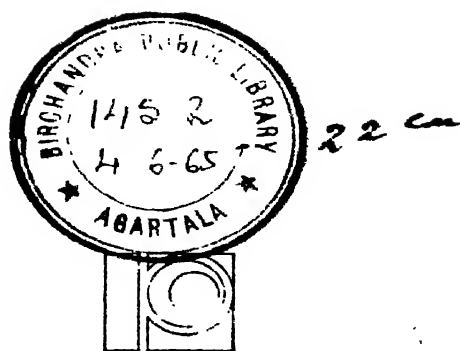


THE UPRISING

THE UPRISING

A Novel by
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UNREST

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Also for Fanny

L. R.

UNREST

Chapter One

SUNRISE

I

'Then you don't really know the Rumanian peasant, if you speak like that. You've probably learnt about him from books and speeches, which is a pity, because you see him as a martyr, when in fact he's just wicked, stupid and lazy!' Ilie Rogojinaru concluded, breathing heavily.

He wiped his respectable bald head with a large, multicoloured handkerchief, and pulled at his thick, drooping moustache, where several strands had perversely twined themselves together in the corner of his mouth. Rogojinaru was the lease-holder of the Olena Dolj estate; a fat man with a big stomach, a neck like a bull, a round head, bright brown eyes and a laughing countenance: a man who looked as if he would burst with joviality at any moment.

Surveying his fellow travellers, he saw that he had not convinced them, and puffed even more loudly. Thereupon Simon Modreanu, a meticulously dressed official from the Ministry of the Interior, cleared his throat and pronounced somewhat weightily: 'My dear sir . . . my dear Mr Rogojinaru, one thing is indisputable: all of us, without exception, live on the hard work of this peasant, lazy and wicked though you call him.'

The lease-holder was so taken aback that he was unable to answer. Once more he mopped his temples with his handkerchief. At this moment the ticket collector appeared, behaving with the courtesy necessary in dealing with first-class passengers. Rogojinaru felt relieved at the interruption.

'What, we're there already? Very good. We haven't done too badly!'

'We've just passed Chitila,' the conductor said, smiling at the jovial lease-holder, taking the tickets of the other passengers. Rogojinaru produced a yellow piece of paper from his wallet which was the size of a bag, and handed it to the conductor with obvious pride: 'Here you are, my good man. One has to be economical these days; the heavens won't fall if a Christian travels free of charge.'

It was only the conductor who smiled this time. He withdrew^{*} from the compartment, saluting deferentially. The lease-holder, however, suddenly became anxious, and started to gather together the suitcases, baskets and bundles he had scattered freely about the compartment, for his fellow passengers had very little luggage. Modreanu had already placed his elegant leather suitcase on his knees, self-consciously displaying its attached label; the police inspector, a tall, nervous-looking individual, who had boarded the train at Găești, only carried his sword and a folder, while the dark young gentleman with the English-style moustache had placed his small suitcase on the little table by the window.

Like some apocalyptic beast, the train whistled and belched smoke. The official was regretting that he had lowered himself to speak to that vulgar fellow. The inspector was watching Rogojinaru bustling about, with admiring curiosity. The young man had been gazing out of the window ever since the conductor had left. The outlines of Bucharest appeared on the horizon. Posters flashed past, affixed to poles or isolated houses. The parallel lines of the rails multiplied, drew closer, and merged. The wheels clattered over level crossings with increasing frequency, and passed across points with the exactitude of a machine. Dirty suburbs appeared, with tumbledown houses and muddy streets, in contrast to the fine buildings which were to come.

After depositing his precious luggage on the empty seats – taking two baskets out into the corridor because there was no more room for them inside – the lease-holder squeezed himself on to the edge of a seat near a suitcase, taking up the conversation where he had left it, and, addressing himself directly to the young man looking out of the window, said: 'Well, as I was saying about the peasants – and you can believe me because I've had a lot of experience in agriculture and with peasants; I'm fifty-nine now and I wasted some forty years in the country among villagers. I started from the bottom, as a man should, and by the time I was thirty I had leased a little place with over five hundred pogons¹ in Telcorman country. Since then several bigger ones have been through my hands, and I don't think there are many people in Wallachia who know peasants like I do. Mind you, I don't say they are all wicked – others do, you know; I'm a Christian, and God forbid that I should lie. But this I can swear on the cross: God help you, if you should ever be in a situation where you need the help of a peasant, for he'll just kick you where it hurts most!'

He saw that not even the inspector was listening to him now. As the train abandoned its headlong rush, and began to slow down, he again remembered his luggage, and stood up to go into the corridor,

¹ For notes on the text, see page 385.

so as to be nearer the exit and thus be sure of securing a porter and a cab. But in the doorway he turned to make his farewells, and stretched out his hand towards Modreanu with whom he had travelled from Craiova. It seemed to him that they had got on pretty well, and perhaps Modreanu might do something for him at the Ministry one of these days.

Although he had spoken little with the young man who had got in at Costești, and who had not even introduced himself, the lease-holder thought it was better to know with whom one had travelled. He therefore said, somewhat naively: 'Excuse me, sir, I'm Ilie Rogojinaru. I'm pleased to have met you, though it's true we didn't seem to agree with each other!'

Not over-pleased, the young gentleman nevertheless rose a little, shook the proffered hand, and said: 'Grigore Iuga.'

The lease-holder started, stood up stiffly, and cried: 'Iuga . . . did you say Iuga? You don't mean to say you're actually Mr Miron Iuga's son, from Amara?'

'Yes, I do,' said the young man, smiling slightly at the fellow's pompous enthusiasm.

'You don't say so! Well, sir, I've known Mr Miron since I was a kid, indeed, if I'm right, we must be the same age! Some twenty-five years ago I was in charge of an estate not more than a few miles from your place in Amara. How is Mr Miron? Is he keeping well? Now there's a man after my own heart,' he added proudly, suddenly turning to the police inspector and Modreanu. 'A true boyar he is, you know, not the kind you meet nowadays at every step. Well, the best of good luck to you!' he went on, addressing himself again to Iuga, and blinking with joy. 'But here we are . . . good-bye, Master Grigore, and please give my respects to your father; he's a real man!'

He shook hands once more and then, firmly holding one basket, which he seemed to prefer to the others, rushed out into the corridor, muttering to the inspector in passing: 'Good-bye, good-bye!' Modreanu, gripping his little suitcase, had been impatiently waiting for the lease-holder to finish his conversation, so that he could pass. As he had not been introduced to Iuga, he nodded indifferently hurrying out after Rogojinaru, who had now managed to squeeze himself out past the door of the compartment.

'Who is that fellow, Mr Rogojinaru? You seemed very pleased to make his acquaintance!' remarked Modreanu, speaking close to the lease-holder's ear, because the noise of the engine under the roof of the station drowned all voices.

'Oh, my dear sir!' answered Rogojinaru in a very respectful tone, such as he had used in front of young Iuga. 'Seven thousand pogons, all excellent land, in Argeș country, down near Teleorman! Seven

thousand, Mr Modreanu, seven thousand and very efficient people, too; not many like that in Wallachia. The old gentleman would not lease you a piece of his land, not for the world, no, not him! Well, good-bye! I hope we shall meet again,' and he opened the coach door. 'Hey, porter, porter! Here, boy, here, here! Can't you hear? Are you deaf? Where are you looking, muddle-head! Can't you see me? Are you blind? . . . Come here, look sharp, and take these!'

The blasts from the engine came at longer intervals and grew weaker. Between them were heard the voices of newly-arrived passengers and those who had been waiting. The whole station was filled with noise, while from time to time a single sound disengaged itself and was heard distinctly, a burst of laughter, a few happy words, a smacking kiss. Above all there rang out persistent shouts for porters. The passengers began to move towards the exit, the majority carrying their own luggage, a few with porters behind them. Everybody was in a hurry, some even running as if they were being pursued.

Grigore Iuga stayed quietly in his place, waiting until those in the corridor had departed. Through the window he saw Modreanu protecting his little case from the insistent demands of porters, he saw the tall inspector look round anxiously as if expecting someone, he saw Rogojinaru's broad shoulders swaying behind an overloaded little man carrying his cases and bundles, the lease-holder, meanwhile, issuing a stream of energetic instructions in a voice that rose above all others.

Finally, when the noise had died down, young Iuga alighted, found a cab with great difficulty, and instructed the driver to take him to Strada Argintari. First they drove through Calea Grivitei, broad, noisy and dirty, lined with a variety of shops, whose owners stood in the doorways urging reluctant passers-by to purchase their wares. Dozens of hotels, inns and pubs competed to take in, for much money and little return, the travellers who poured incessantly out of the Gara de Nord. On the wide pavements jostled a motley crowd, a swarm of orientals: workers; clerks; peasants walking in groups like nervous sheep; housemaids in Hungarian national dress; humble soldiers; dubious young ladies smothered in cosmetics who ogled every male they saw, including apprentices and schoolboys, pushing each other about and bumping against the crowd and the fences; *braga*² vendors; Bulgarians hawking metal bells and Turks selling sweets.

As the cab rattled over the cobble-stones, Grigore Iuga, slightly intimidated, surveyed this ant-hill of people which was Bucharest. He experienced this feeling whenever he returned from the country; after the quiet life on the estate, the bustle wearied and saddened him at first, until he became acclimatised again.

On Colţea Boulevard, near the Strada Argintari crossing, one of the horses slipped and fell. First the cabman began to curse, and then to flog. All was useless, he had to leap down and loosen the harness. As home was only a hundred yards away, Grigore settled with him and walked on.

The second house in Strada Argintari was theirs, or rather hers – his wife's. The metal railings, designed like a grill and topped by a row of brilliantly polished spikes, had a beautiful wrought-iron gate in the middle. In front of the house was a little well-tended garden, its flower-beds separated by paths neatly bordered with stones. The building itself, a bungalow, showily decorated, caught the attention of the passer-by, especially with its red marble steps, which were protected by a glass porch, like a huge shiny sea-shell.

2

As he entered the gate, Grigore Iuga saw a stranger at the top of the steps, speaking to the servant.

The butler, dressed in faintly grotesque livery (Nadina's idea) stepped down to greet him. It appeared that the young, rather tall, fair-haired visitor was a gentleman from Transylvania³ and that he had already called twice asking to speak to Mr Iuga. Meanwhile, the stranger descended the steps and came towards Grigore. After the servant had disappeared with his master's suitcase, he took off his hat and said, confusedly: 'I'm Titu Herdelea; I'm a poet . . .'

Grigore's response was confined to a vague smile, which made young Herdelea even more confused. He wore a dark green artist's tie, patterned with white spots, which flowed over his stiff, high collar. He shifted his hat to his left hand and tried to smile back, but did not succeed. After a pause, which seemed like a century, he took courage and, putting on his hat very carefully, as if not sure whether he was acting correctly, went on nervously: 'I'm sorry you found me here, but I was asked this summer, that is, two months ago, to make sure that I came here as early as possible, by Mr Gogu Ionescu, the deputy, at Sîngeorz, in Transylvania.'

'Oh, from Transylvania?' Grigore murmured, now showing some interest. This encouraged the young man to say once again: 'Yes, from Transylvania. I could also add that I am distantly related to Mr Ionescu, because – I don't know whether you know – my sister Laura is married to the priest George Pintea of Sătmar, and George's sister is Mr Ionescu's wife.'

'Is she, now?' said Iuga more animatedly, taking his hand and shaking it hard. 'I'm very pleased to hear it. And I must tell you

that you are also distantly related to me, because my wife is Gogu Ionescu's sister.'

Titu Herdelea nodded, smilingly. He knew his connection with this house. He had often come to the place looking for Gogu Ionescu, and on these occasions he had learned all the details from the servants, in fact, much more than he wanted.

Grigore liked the simple, pleasant appearance of this young man, but more particularly his shyness, which he tried in vain to hide. Young Iuga felt that he himself had a similar tendency on occasions when something unexpected happened. He took Herdelea's arm as if he were an old friend, and said: 'Now that we know each other, let's go upstairs and have a chat!'

Titu blushed with joy. They walked to the top of the steps under the glass porch, where Grigore paused to explain the partitioning of the house, lest this young man should think that he himself could have such extraordinary architectural notions. The building was formed of two entirely separate dwellings, which, instead of having their own entrance each side, and only the façade in common, had one joint entrance in the middle. When Grigore's father-in-law had built the house ten years ago, he had desired above all else a really imposing marble flight of steps with canopy above, like the one the Nabab had, even though the palace, as he called it, was meant to be the marriage portion for his two offspring, who would settle down in it, each with a separate household. Nadina, Grigore's wife, was dissatisfied, and said that the old man had deliberately built a house in which its inmates could permanently spy upon each other. The enormous oaken door, with its metal ornamentation, which gave the house the appearance of one entity, actually divided it, for its right half opened into Gogu Ionescu's domain, while the left half, which the butler kept wide open, led into Nadina's apartment.

'My wife left for abroad three months ago, and the whole house reeks of moth balls!' he said, leading his guest through the hall towards the first floor, where he had a room kept ready for himself so that he should have a place in Bucharest when Nadina was away. 'As a matter of fact, I'm a citizen of Bucharest only in winter, and even then not all the time. I spend the rest of the year in the country, both because I have to and because I feel much more at home there. My wife hates the country as much as I hate the town. But please sit down. You don't mind if I just change and brush myself up a little while we talk . . . why it's half-past one! I've got an appointment at three with my grain merchant. I shall hardly have time to get a bite somewhere; I must be quick.'

Titu now started to explain properly how he had arrived in Bucharest nearly four weeks ago with great hopes of Gogu Ionescu's

support, for he had promised that he would find Titu a job on a newspaper, thus fulfilling his wish to write. What an unpleasant surprise it had been to find that Ionescu had gone abroad. But more serious was the fact that since his arrival Titu had spent more than a third of the little money he had brought with him, and he was afraid that while waiting in vain he would be forced to spend the rest before finding a job, and would become destitute among strangers.

'I wouldn't like to shatter your illusions,' said Grigore, who had now changed his clothes, 'but my good brother-in-law is not the sort of man to base one's hopes upon. He is a very nice fellow, a wonderfully good soul, well-intentioned, but rather unreliable. If his wife had kept on at him, then he would have done something about it. She is the only person who has the charm and ability to stimulate his slumbering energy.'

After a moment of dismay, young Herdelea said, with fresh confidence: 'Then there's still hope for me, because my sister-in-law seemed to like me when we met this summer.'

'She shouldn't do too much of that,' smiled Iuga. 'Gogu is as jealous as a Turk, and he would turn you out of the country if he so much as suspected that . . .'

In fact, in his dreams, Titu had imagined the day when Eugenia, who had seemed in Sîngeorz to be a rare beauty, would fall into his arms, won by his then famous verse. But, to take advantage of the beloved's feelings just to gain one's own advancement seemed to him so shameful that he paled to the very tips of his ears at the thought. Grigore noticed his confusion, and hastily came to the rescue.

'You're naive, my friend, I'm afraid you won't take root here. If you want to be a success these days, you need audacity and arrogance. A man who walks about with maidenly scruples is doomed from the beginning to be crushed by people who haven't got the faintest idea what such romantic sentiments mean!'

Now ready to leave, he took up his brief-case, saying in a different tone: 'Have you had lunch?'

'Not yet,' stammered Titu, surprised.

'If you like, you can come with me.'

Though very flattered, the young man said that he usually had his meals with a family from Transylvania, and that they would be waiting, hungry, for God knew how long, as he had not told them he would not be coming, and he must therefore refuse. Actually, this did not worry him unduly, but he was too shy to go with Iuga to some big restaurant in the clothes he was wearing. To save his best suit he had put on his every-day clothes until he could buy himself some new ones. It seemed that Grigore's invitation had only

been a formality, for he did not insist, but added rapidly: 'Of course, I understand. Still, I would like to meet you again. I'll tell you what. We'll have dinner together tonight. Agreed? You'll have time to tell your landlord about it, and I shan't be so busy. Then that's settled. We'll go to Enache's. You know where it is? In Strada Academiei. Eight o'clock? Right!'

3

Titu Herdelea ran along the pavement with his hat over one ear and his face beaming with joy. People turned to look at him as if he was drunk. His heart hammered loudly and he kept repeating 'At last . . . thank God! What a fine man! You can see at once that he is a boyar. I think God has noticed me at last.'

He cut rapidly through Strada Romană, Calea Victoriei and Strada Verde so as to get to his furnished room in Buzești. The Gavrilaș family, with whom he had his meals, were his neighbours.

Gavrilaș also hailed from Amaradia in Transylvania, and had been living in Rumania for ten years. He was a member of the Bucharest secret police and his special responsibility was to check hotel lists. He had been at school with Titu's father, who was now a teacher himself. One morning he had found, among the names of the latest arrivals in the register of the 'Hotel English', one Herdelea, and when he saw that the guest had come from Transylvania, he had known it must be Zaharia's son. With little hesitation he had gone up to Titu's room, waking and welcoming him, and offering his friendly services to save the lad from being fleeced like the other foreigners who landed in this beautiful yet dangerous city. The same day he had found the newcomer a cheap but decent room, right next to his own house. Towards the evening Titu had been taken and installed there. Then Gavrilaș had invited the young man over to have dinner, so that his wife should meet him. The other member of the household was Miss Marioara Rădulescu, a girl of some eighteen years, sweet and lively like a squirrel, who was a pupil at the Professional School. It was because of her that Gavrilaș had not been able to invite Titu to stay with them. Mrs Gavrilaș who was short, plump and red, with a permanently shining face, had felt that she could, after all, have taken the young man in as well. Marioara's room had two beds, and the young people would have settled down there quite nicely; both of them were very proper. Mr Gavrilaș, however, had been against this, saying that it was not decent, and might start tongues wagging. After a couple of days, however, as Titu had difficulty with the strange food, Mrs Gavrilaș had agreed to let him have his meals with them for a modest sum. Thus he was

a daily visitor. Marioara later confessed that she was rather weak in her knowledge of Rumanian literature and grammar, and needed coaching. Titu, being a well-mannered young man, thereupon offered his services, to the joy of the good lady of the house, who loved the girl as if she were her own daughter and dearly wanted her to pass her examinations. So lessons were started that very evening, after dinner, in Titu's room, where they could be quiet and undisturbed. The first lesson lasted until past midnight. Next day the young man explained to Mrs Gavrilas, who had been rather worried, that he had kept Marioara there so long because – as the good lady herself had remarked – the subject had been rather neglected. Marioara for her part declared that she had never had such pleasant lessons, and that she would be glad if Titu could coach her as often as possible, after which she was sure she would succeed.

He found the family drinking coffee.

'We're going to hang the spoons round your neck, my young fellow!' was Gavrilas' greeting to the late-comer as he slowly drew on a cigarette he had just rolled with great care.

'It's this young lady who's to blame for making us start without you, Mr Titu,' his wife interpolated, nodding at Marioara, who smiled saucily. 'She said she was so hungry she couldn't bear to wait, and wouldn't, not even for a prince!'

Titu, bursting with happiness, rushed to Marioara, took her in his arms, and kissed her on the mouth, eyes and cheeks until her hair was all ruffled; in his exuberance knocking a cup of coffee over on to Mrs Gavrilas' clean table-cloth.

'That's quite enough of that,' said Gavrilas irritably, protecting his own threatened cup. His wife, meanwhile, fidgeted nervously with her fingers, as if witnessing a catastrophe. The girl, however, was quite pleased at the outburst, and received the storm of kisses cooing like a dove.

'Victory, Mr Gavrilas!' shouted Titu hoarsely, flinging his hat on to the divan like a triumphant general.

He breathlessly told them how he had met Grigore Iuga, what they had talked about, how he had nearly missed this lunch, and of his invitation to dine at Enache's. The spilt coffee and the soiled table-cloth were instantly forgiven and forgotten. Gavrilas had for several years been a sort of steward on an estate in Vlaşca county, where he had also made a little pile, and therefore he had a great respect for estates and big landowners as the only solid institution in Rumania. Everything else he found fault with, because since he had joined the secret police, three years ago, he had not obtained promotion, although he deserved it, for he was conscientious and had more education than his colleagues, but he had no strings to pull.

'If only you could become a steward on his estate, for just a few years, God would look upon you and you would become a man,' he said thoughtfully after a pause, with an admiring, yet rather envious look. Titu, meanwhile, heartily attacked his Transylvanian stew, which had been kept warm for him.

Gavrilaş was as short as his wife, and had a thick moustache, too big for his face, a deeply furrowed brow, and a complexion suffused with crimson, like that of a circus clown.

A long discussion followed on the young man's prospects. Mrs Gavrilaş contributed with vague recollections of the manager in Vlaşca. Only Marioara was quiet, pouting at Titu occasionally, and throwing pellets of bread at him, which he did not notice, being preoccupied with more serious matters.

Little by little the excitement died down. Gavrilaş, who was used to having a nap in the afternoon, started yawning, stretching and sighing, and finally lay down. Marioara reluctantly dragged herself off to the school, and Mrs Gavrilaş began washing up, while Titu went to his lodging to get ready for his dinner at Enache's.

His room was in the next house. A ramshackle wooden gate led into a long, dirty courtyard, bordered by numerous little rooms, all occupied. The apartment near the street, with two rooms and a parlour in the middle, was occupied by Mrs Elena Alexandrescu, who, though over forty, was still a good-looking woman. She was the widow of an officer, whom she sometimes talked of as a major or a colonel, but who had actually died a lieutenant. Mrs Alexandrescu lived in the front room with Mr Jean Ionescu, a young rake who was a copy-clerk at the Ministry of the Interior. There were only two book-cases in the parlour, containing the library of Dr Vasile Popescu, of Piteşti, who was the husband of Mimi, Mrs Alexandrescu's daughter. The back-room, with its two little windows looking into the courtyard, was Titu's, and had an iron bed, a wash-stand, a round table, three chairs, a shaky wardrobe, and some small ornaments which the family called their *bibelots*. Further down the court there lived a Jewish cobbler, Mendelson, with five children, the eldest of whom had just completed his military service in the artillery; there was also a Bulgarian pie-maker, who had a shop in the neighbourhood; a tailor, with four little children, whose wife had died not long ago; and a pensioner with a young wife and a student lodger.

As soon as he entered the yard, the young man was addressed in happy, chirruping tones by Mrs Alexandrescu, and knew at once that Jean must be at the office. The door into the parlour stood wide open, and the lady was visible inside at her toilet, powder puff in one hand and lipstick in the other, preening herself like an old parrot.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Alexandrescu!' he called, politely as

always, taking out the key to his room and inserting it in the lock.

'*Bonjour, bonjour*, young gentleman,' answered his landlady, charmed at having so nice-mannered a tenant.

'Why are you in such a hurry?' she went on, with the voice of a hoarse siren. 'Come a bit closer, I won't bite you.' She continued her face-painting operations while Titu, having opened his door, threw his hat inside on to the table. 'I'm alone. Darling Jenică has gone to the Ministry. Come along in, don't be nervous! Jenică is not at all jealous, although he adores me.' She suddenly became conscious of the tumbled bed, and hastened to tidy it, murmuring complacently: 'Just see how naughty you men are – one can't get rid of you!'

Titu, embarrassed, changed the subject by announcing that he might be late that evening because he was going to meet a gentleman at Enache's.

'At Enache's! How lovely!' exclaimed Mrs Alexandrescu, giving a sentimental sigh. 'I've never been there since my husband died, bless him.'

She was lost for a while in eulogies of poor Mache, who had died so young, even going so far as to show Titu his photograph to prove how good-looking he had been. She added that it was only thanks to her own untouched dowry that she had been able to marry Mimi off, and if she had but once stopped to consider the difficulties, she would not have been able to do it. Then, having completed her toilet, she went on to detail all the quarrels, almost rows, poor Jenică had gone through with his parents because of her. They were well-to-do people, she said, but with rather old-fashioned ideas on certain matters, and at first would not for anything in the world agree to their son living with her, in fact they had tried with all their might to force him to marry some scarecrow whom they considered a brilliant match. Jenică, however, as well as being very nice, had a very firm character, and had declared outright that he would rather break with his family than part with his beloved, who, besides being a fine woman, looked after him very well, and was truly devoted to him. So, she said, the old couple had been compelled to give in, and by now all four were very good, intimate friends. As a matter of fact, there had been, and still was, some trouble with her own son-in-law because of Jenică. Mimi wouldn't say a word, because she knew how her mother had suffered, and how many sacrifices she had made, and felt that at least now she should be allowed to lead her own life; but her son-in-law was a country lad, with an outlook dating back to 1848, and he had flatly declared that he would not cross her threshold unless she stopped living with Jenică, for he wasn't going to put himself in a position where he would have to meet her gigolo. Gigolo, indeed! Ridiculous! Didn't

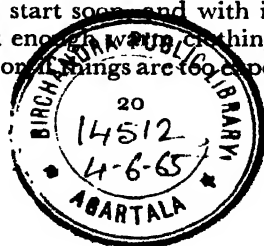
Jenică earn his living as a clerk? Her son-in-law had even attempted to stop Mimi seeing her mother, so that whenever the poor darling came to Bucharest they had to meet in secret – her own mother, who had borne and reared her!

‘Ah, my God, one has to pay dearly for what little happiness one can snatch,’ sighed Mrs Alexandrescu, overcome by emotion.

The young man did not know how to take such intimate confessions, especially when they took a sad turn. He got up slowly, mentally seeking a consoling phrase. But Mrs Alexandrescu regained her vivacity unaided, and began to praise her daughter for her good looks, her intelligence and her charm, promising Titu that she would introduce them, so that he could see what a truly sweet creature the girl was. Having nothing to do, the good lady would happily have continued gossiping for the whole evening, as, indeed, she had done on other occasions. But Titu was anxious to get ready for his appointment, which might prove a turning-point in his career. Just as he was considering how best to withdraw without hurting his landlady’s feelings, he heard a voice in the courtyard. ‘Mr Titu Herdelea!’

Several other voices could immediately be heard answering: ‘In the front, in the front.’

‘It’s the postman,’ Mrs Alexandrescu volunteered, and he had barely taken three steps into the parlour before the postman appeared and handed him a letter from home. Taking leave of the lady, Titu entered his room, suddenly overcome with emotion. This was the first letter he had received since his arrival in Bucharest. He tore open the envelope and, trembling, devoured the six pages of tiny writing in which Mrs Herdelea, in her evangelistic style, sprinkled with moralising and advice to ‘mother’s distant darling’, told him all that had happened in Amaradia since his departure, from the death of Ion Glanetaşu up to Ghighiţa’s engagement to Zăgreanu, the teacher. ‘The wedding won’t take place until after Christmas, so that we can prepare everything properly. We’re going to give them the house in Pripaş, so that it shall be lived in again, and perhaps it will bring them luck, as it did for us. It would be nice if you could come to the wedding. The poor child cries all the time because she thinks you might not come. But you must busy yourself with your own future. Do the best you can and hold fast to your faith in God, for He does not desert the honest and faithful. You must be patient, my darling; we know it’s not all milk and honey in Rumania either, but a man should not despair, but struggle on over all obstacles until, with God’s help, he succeeds. The cold weather will start soon, and with it the winter, and I’m not sure that you took enough for anything. Mind you get some with your first money, our things are so expensive there, send some



23.00
R. 00.00

money home and we'll have something made by Strulovici, you know he is a good, inexpensive tailor.'

In a postscript his sister Ghighi wrote that she was not going to have her wedding, whatever the old people said, if he did not come, adding that she was definitely going to the students' ball, but didn't know what frock to wear; it would be nice to have a new one made, especially as she was engaged and everybody would be looking at her.

In another postscript Herdelea senior urged his son not to forget to write something for the *Tribuna Bistriței* as he had promised on leaving, because its editor was still waiting for his report on the Astra⁴ festivities. And would he please send some newspapers, so that the people at home might see real Rumanian papers, and if he did get something published, send it home too, so that everybody could see what young Herdelea was doing in Rumania.

Titu re-read the letter several times, as if to learn it by heart. He felt as if he were home again in Transylvania, in that world from which every little thing, however insignificant, echoed strongly throughout his whole being, so delightful were his memories. Overcome by nostalgia, he wanted to answer at once, as if this were the only way to ease his heart. On the table was his library – several books he had brought from home – together with notebooks in which were scribbled fragments of poetry, ink and pens. But no writing paper. While looking for it, he remembered Iuga, came back to reality, and decided to postpone his answer until he was able to write something really important.

Suddenly it was six o'clock. The supreme moment of preparation had arrived. There were certain little matters to attend to, some mending here and there, shoes to be polished, his black worsted suit to be brushed, a suit which was so little worn it was good enough to visit royalty in. He must be very punctual, for a gentleman is known by his punctuality; surely it was better to wait a few minutes than to make others wait.

4

'You are late, my friend,' said Grigore Iuga, smiling and proffering his hand. 'I think you've become a Bucharester, too! But sit down here by me. We didn't wait for you because we were hungry.'

A waiter took Titu's hat and coat, while he, upset as he was, hesitated whether to tell the truth or to let Iuga believe he had in fact been late. He found himself murmuring, in a dazed, confused voice: 'But I was here long ago. I even looked into the restaurant once, and then I walked up and down in front, waiting for you. How could I have missed seeing you come in?'

'Don't apologize, we were a quarter of an hour late, too,' interposed Grigore, amiably. 'That's how we all are, we Rumanians. But let me introduce you.'

He presented his two companions. Lawyer Baloleanu, although actually not much older than Iuga, was very stout. He had a tiny, sharply cut brown beard, and his hair was arranged so as to conceal carefully the first signs of baldness. His bluish-grey eyes glittered intelligently and cunningly. While eating heavily, he complained that drink bloated him, but he could not give it up, although the doctors had warned him that he tended to get fat. His love was politics; when his party had been in power he had been a deputy, and was a leading party official in Ialomița, where he had earlier acquired an estate of some six hundred pogons. His small but solid legal clientele assured him a comfortable income, and he had become known as a great lawyer, but in fact he seldom went to the bar, and even slightly despised his colleagues who did, referring to them jokingly as 'the wailers'. Nevertheless he had his entry to the Palace of Justice, as he was considered politically to be up-and-coming, and was able to do a number of good turns through his influence with the powers that be.

The other diner was Constantin Dumescu, manager of the Rumanian Bank, a clean-shaven man with gold-rimmed spectacles, lustreless sandy hair, and slightly stooping shoulders, as though he were too tall. He was a taciturn bachelor, a good friend of Grigore's father.

The two received Titu without enthusiasm, as though he were an intruder. After the introductions, he fell to studying the menu nervously; he did not yet know the food in Rumania, and the names of the dishes meant nothing to him. In addition, he was furious with himself for not seeing Iuga when he had arrived. Grigore would think he was not a man of his word, when in fact he had come half an hour earlier precisely to avoid such an occurrence. But he had not dared to enter and occupy a table.

After a short silence Baloleanu resumed the conversation which had been interrupted by the young man's arrival, saying in a somewhat superior manner: 'As I was remarking, my dear Grigoriță, the peasant problem cannot be solved without sacrifices on the part of those who own the land. That's certain. Everything else, all secondary offers, are merely palliatives. The peasant wants land. That's final. That's all he knows and that's all he wants.'

Iuga answered calmly, but with a glint in his eye which showed that the subject mattered deeply to him. 'I'm sorry, Alexandru, but as you present it, the matter simply becomes a demand used for election propaganda, or cheap and dangerous demagoguery. It is very easy to arouse an appetite, but more difficult to satisfy it. How

can you persuade me, a landowner, to give the peasants land on which I and my ancestors have worked with them over centuries – when you yourself buy estates at the same time, and . . .’

A little hurt, the lawyer interrupted: ‘Just a moment, let’s deal with these points first. First of all you must understand that we are not looking at the matter from a personal point of view. When I spoke, I spoke in general, ignoring the fact that you happen to be a big landowner, and that I happen to be in politics. We are, above all, people who know the peasant problem, both from books and from personal experience. We are interested in it, as everybody is, because on its settlement depends our fate and even the country’s future, isn’t that true? This is an impersonal discussion. I’m sure, as a matter of fact, that if sacrifices are called for, Mr Miron and you would be the first to make them.’

‘You’re quite wrong there, my dear sir,’ Grigore exclaimed. ‘Father would never agree to part with the estate. He is attached to it, both by past struggles and by his pride. Land means life itself to him, just as it does to the peasants. You know that very well, because you have been on our estate and understand the situation. And, although I’m not so unyielding, I would not myself hand over my land. For it would not go to the peasants, who don’t ask for gifts anyway, but to the petty demagogues in the towns, who have one eye to the elections, and that is why they surreptitiously drag in certain theories which responsible people repudiate, and which even the agitators themselves would not put into actual practice.’

‘See, we have a conservative with us!’ smiled Baloleanu, addressing Dumescu, and then, turning again to Iuga: ‘But just a moment, my dear boy. Because you mentioned me, let’s settle matters. Do you think that the small property which I earned by honest sweat over ten years, and that I am even now in debt for, do you think these few hundred pogons of mine will solve the problem? Nevertheless, I swear in all seriousness that, although I am a poor man, if need be, I would, without a word, put my piece of land at the disposal of the country! Are you satisfied? Do I make myself clear?’

‘Of course, you could give your land to the estate, because as soon as you bought it you leased it out!’ answered Iuga stressing each word contemptuously.

Hurt, and amazed that anybody, especially a close friend, should suggest that he, a respectable lawyer, and a political figure, should bury himself in the countryside, Baloleanu retorted ironically: ‘You don’t mean to say, my dear fellow, that you want me to give up my job, at which I’m rather good after all, and take up agriculture?’

‘Yes I do, if you want to have land! The man who owns land should work it and love it, otherwise he should give it up. You, my dear sir, took the estate from under the very noses of the villagers,

who wanted to buy it and divide it among themselves. You went there, pushed them aside, and three days afterwards sent a leaseholder to squeeze money out of it for you and for him. On the one hand, you prevent the peasant from buying land when he has the opportunity, and on the other you urge me, who sweat alongside the peasants, to part with my estate and just throw it away like an old glove!

'But, my dear Grigoriță,' said the lawyer conciliatorily, 'there are very few big landowners like you. The great majority lost their contact with the land long ago. Every general measure must take into consideration the majority of cases, and not the few exceptions.'

'Then why don't you first of all take steps against those who have become alienated from their estates? Why do you immediately think of destroying a social class, maybe the most loyal, which represents the basic wealth of the country? It's true that not many landlords have remained at their posts. It's difficult for some of them to live in the country, they have come to think that tilling the land is something dishonourable – and not only tilling the land, but labour in general. They prefer to make a pile of money and throw it about at parties. Their places have been taken by the lease-holders, who squeeze out one rent for the boyar and another – a better one – for themselves. So it is quite natural that the peasants complain, agitate and threaten, in secret or quite openly. While I, a landowner, working and saving, can barely make a decent living, the leaseholder, my neighbour, pays over tens of thousands of gold coins to his landlord, and lines his own pockets, too. Where does all this money come from? From the leaseholder or from the peasant's misery? What do you think, Costică?' ended Grigore, addressing Dumescu. 'Tell me, isn't it so?'

The bank manager was gazing nervously at his plate, for both had spoken so loudly that people sitting at neighbouring tables had begun to look at them. The question caught him unawares, for he had followed the discussion only superficially. To him, a man of figures, debates at a dinner table seemed futile, if not ridiculous. Serious problems were not solved between a Viennese *schnitzel* and an apple-*strudel*; if anything, they became more complicated. Before he could answer, a familiar voice broke in from a nearby table: 'Sorry to interrupt . . .'

They all looked round, astonished that a stranger should burst in on their conversation.

'I'm Ilie Rogojinaru. I had the good fortune to meet you, Mr Iuga, in the train today.'

The leaseholder was alone. He had come in after them, and had accidentally overheard the conversation. He moved his chair a little nearer, unperturbed by their amazement, and went on, as if he had

known all of them for an eternity: 'But, because Mr Iuga said that lease-holders were this and that . . . Now, I'm not saying this because I am a lease-holder, but I think Mr Iuga was mistaken to speak ill of people who don't entirely deserve it. You won't be offended, sir, if I disagree with you again, will you? Lease-holders are not really such calamities for the country as you say, and as the newspapers write. Not really. A lease-holder must work three times as hard as a landlord, so as to make the rent, plus a certain income. The peasant doesn't work more, or for less money, for a lease-holder than for a boyar, indeed he may ask more from the lease-holder. Let Mr Iuga say honestly whether the agreements with the lease-holder next to Amara are heavier on the peasants than those on his own estates. But the lease-holder is pressed by necessity and does make some savings; he cultivates the land more intensively by working on areas which had formerly lain fallow, he introduces machines, he raises the level of agricultural exploitation. Does all this amount to nothing? Of course there are skinflint lease-holders who oppress the peasants, just as there are bad landlords, but to condemn them all en bloc without considering the circumstances is not just, nor advisable.'

Irritated at the unmannerly interruption of the lease-holder, Grigore Iuga said very clearly and contemptuously: 'That may be so, my dear sir, but if no lease-holders had sprung up between the landlords and the peasants, there would be no peasant problem in Rumania today. The appearance of the lease-holder has prevented the passing of the land to the peasants, as would have been healthy and normal. The landlord who became bored with his estate would have sold it to the peasants, if the lease-holders had not pushed themselves forward to offer a large, safe income without any work or bother on the part of the landlord.'

'Maybe,' Rogojinaru admitted, with a candid smile, 'it might easily be so. I don't deny it. If the peasants had really been diligent and responsible, that is. But I have a long experience in this matter and you must allow me to keep my conviction that the lease-holder intervened precisely because the Rumanian peasant was lazy and thriftless, waiting for everything to drop either from the boyars or, nowadays, from the state. That's it, gentlemen, I'm sorry if you hold different opinions, but as far as I am concerned . . .'

Here, Baloleanu made a gesture of consternation, finding himself unable to disagree. But Grigore was hardly able to control his indignation and heatedly interrupted the lease-holder.

'I heard you talking like this in the train, too, sir. I didn't answer you because it seemed monstrous to me that a man who lived and became rich by exploiting the peasants should repeatedly state that those very peasants were lazy. But, even supposing they are lazy,

as you say, your reproaches or insults should not be directed at them, but at those who only formally emancipated them and, in fact, left them more tied than under serfdom. Instead of enlightenment being taken to them, they were forcibly kept in darkness. We did not want a peasant-citizen, it seems, but preferred a peasant-animal. And now, on top of all this, we insult them, too, and assert that they are wicked and lazy. Why, ask him,' he went on, suddenly pointing to Titu, who was immediately struck dumb, 'he is from Transylvania, and came here only recently, ask him whether the peasants there are lazy or lack initiative! And don't forget that the Rumanians there are under foreign rule. But they have had leaders who really felt something for the peasants, who taught them and showed them the way, and set them a good example, which was followed. We keep talking about the peasants, and are content with empty words. We never perform any honest or disinterested action for them!'

Iuga's strong words had aroused a titter here and there around them, and he realized that he had made himself ridiculous, for his tone had not been in keeping with the surroundings. He lapsed into silence, more embarrassed even than Dumescu, who had begun to show signs of impatience. Rogojinaru, although he had his reply ready, was content to mumble something into his plate, so as not to make things worse. Only Baloleanu said, in a low voice, intended only for their own table: 'You are right, my dear Grigoriță, very right. The poor peasant knows nothing except how to suffer, for he has been taught nothing else. And when he cannot stand it anymore, when the knife touches his bone - then it is quite natural that he should burst out madly, with fire and bloodshed. In this century of Western civilization, this country is the only place where desperate peasant revolts are still breaking out, and that because this is the only country where the peasant seeks for justice in vain. And so it will go on until one day we shall wake up to a catastrophe which will shake the country to its very foundations!'

Seeing, however, that the conversation had reached a deadlock, he then changed the subject, commenting on the harvest, which, it was said, was good enough, but could not be turned to account because of the financial crisis. He went on to talk about the position of the government, which he considered very shaky, and said he hoped that his party would soon take office again. Passing on to foreign policy, they touched on the subject of their Transylvanian brothers, and discussed Titu's situation. Now, Dumescu, too, began to take an interest, for he was a fervent nationalist, always dreaming of the conquest of Transylvania. Grigore told them that young Herdelea would like to settle down in this country, upon which Dumescu, as the matter concerned a Transylvanian, immediately offered him employment as a clerk in his own bank - a modest

position, of course, for the time being, but just intended to show whether ultimately he could do better. Iuga, however, though expressing appreciation for the offer, refused on behalf of his protégé. 'What can a poet do in a bank, unless he goes there to borrow money without security, without interest, and without a date for repayment?'

Titu said nothing, but he was glad that Iuga had not accepted. He had not crossed the Carpathians to become a bank clerk. 'A newspaper would be more suitable for him,' Iuga went on. 'Yes, yes, a newspaper,' repeated the young man, enthusiastically. Baloleanu was very friendly with the editor of the *Universul*, for whom he had won a rather dubious lawsuit. He now promised that he would do something, but Titu must remind him, in case it somehow slipped his memory.

'You will excuse me, I'm sure,' the lawyer then said, preparing to leave. 'I left my wife to eat alone, just for your sake, Grigoriță, because it's ages since I saw you. I hope you'll give me the pleasure of entertaining you at my place, too, so that my Melania can meet you, because we are always talking about you. Come whenever you like. You needn't even announce yourself. Just behave as if it were home.'

A controversy then developed between Iuga and Dumescu as to who should pay the bill, Grigore emerging victorious by telling Dumescu that otherwise he would be permanently offended. They parted outside the restaurant; Titu remaining with Iuga. At that moment Rogojinaru appeared in the doorway with a cigar in his mouth and an ancient umbrella under his arm.

'Sir!' he said to Grigore, speaking as a parent to a child. 'You are young and you get excited very quickly. I'm older and I don't get angry at every trifle. I don't know when we shall meet again, but I hope the Lord never brings you to a position where you have to say: "That wretched Rogojinaru was right after all." Good night!'

Grigore Iuga looked at him for a moment but said nothing. The lease-holder's familiarity annoyed him; he was tired and, more especially, he was bored. The discussions had frayed his nerves. He had told himself time and time again that he would not discuss these matters, and yet he was always breaking his resolution.

They reached Calca Victoriei without having said a word. A bitter wind, the harbinger of cold rain was blowing. The clouds seemed almost to touch the roofs of the houses, eddies of air whirled in the street lifting the dust and depositing it in the pavement beneath the feet of the few passers-by. Grigore recalled Rogojinaru's words, and said: 'You see, he had a feeling that the weather would change, and brought an umbrella . . .'

A cab came bowling down from the *Chaussée*, bearing a gentleman and two ladies, all laughing merrily as if the world was at their feet.

Titu Herdelea walked along, pondering silently. He realized that Iuga did not feel like talking, so he did not bother him. He weighed up the evening in his mind, and decided that it had been satisfactory. If he could get a job at the *Universul*, he could consider himself well and permanently employed. Admittedly, it was not a very sophisticated newspaper, but it appeared to be soundly established and well known. He would have preferred to go on to *Adevărul*, which was more attractive, more argumentative, and more intellectual. But this would do for a beginning; that is if the lawyer did not forget to speak to his friend the editor. Titu told himself that he must call at Baloleanu's the next day: But, no, first he must consult Iuga; he must not make a *faux-pas*, offend him, and then lose him. Once the Lord had sent him such an extraordinarily nice person, another couple of days' waiting would not matter.

As they reached Piața Palatului Regal, however, it seemed to him that the silence had gone on too long. Wondering how he could break it, he remembered Grigore's interest in the peasants, and said hesitatingly, as if dealing with a sacred matter: 'I've never heard people talk so much about the peasants. It's always the peasants. Everybody, everywhere discusses the peasant problem; making all sorts of suggestions. Why is there so much talk? Even at my lodgings, as soon as the tenants get together, they begin to discuss the peasants, and go on talking about them endlessly. To say nothing about the shoemaker, and especially his son, who is a great socialist. Every time they see me, they bother me with all sorts of solutions and prophecies, saying that if the peasant problem is not solved there will be a revolution which will lay Bucharest in ruins!'

Grigore shuddered as if waking from a dream. He had been asking himself the same question, and searching for the answer. Looking at the furious clouds tossing above their heads, he murmured: 'It might be just a passing fashion, but then it might also be an age-old suffering, which weighs upon people's souls. Who knows?'

5

Grigore turned sleeplessly in his bed. He had read the evening papers without taking in anything. His thoughts flashed hither and thither, restlessly digging into the past, recalling bitter moments, plans and hopes; all combining to drive away his peace of mind. He repeatedly switched on his bedside lamp, either to make a re-

assuring calculation, or to check up on the days' prices, or to look at one more detail on the photograph of Nadina which hung above his bed, gazing languidly down upon him. Almost completely naked, she lay upon a bearskin, her arm resting on the head of the beast, her small breasts as firm as if turned to marble in sensual excitement, the tender curves of her hips warmly appealing, and on her face a smile of simulated virginal candour. She had given him this almost life-size photograph in an ornate frame, on his birthday, three years ago, after they had been married for a year. He had expressed pleasure on receiving the present, but he had lied, for as he took her in his arms, he had felt sorrow and disappointment. In his mind, he had formulated the unspoken claim that at least her naked body belonged to him alone. The thought that his wife, his most precious love, should have exhibited herself like that to a stranger, even if only a photographer, filled him with grief.

He had reached Bucharest full of hope that everything would go smoothly. That day he had had to collect the final instalment for the grain he had sold and delivered; to settle with Dumescu at the 'Rumanian Bank' regarding the bill of exchange, which fell due on Monday - matters which need only take a couple of hours. After settling business affairs he had thought of staying on a day or two to meet his friends, just to remind them that he was still alive. Then he had intended to return to Amara with the rest of the money, which would be enough to satisfy his current needs until the maize harvest was sold. He liked things to be orderly, and was meticulous in his affairs; characteristics he had acquired during his two years in Germany. He had prepared his programme in advance in every detail. In his pocket now rested the grain merchant's bill of exchange, which fell due on the morrow. To him it was like solid gold; the signature of this firm, the most important grain exporters in Rumania, was acknowledged everywhere in Europe.

But on the very first item in his programme in Strada Bursei, fate had dealt his expectations a crushing blow. The manager of the firm, a tall, venerable, stiff Armenian, had invited Grigore into his private sanctum, plied him with coffee and a smuggled Harana, and confidentially but insistently requested a month's postponement of payment - just one month. In vain had Grigore protested that, after all, this was a bill of exchange, and so on. Explanation and discussion had ensued; the times were bad, the prices on the foreign market had recently fallen, the situation was almost catastrophic, in fact, Russian competition had unexpectedly disturbed the balance of trade; the Russian crop, which everyone had expected to be bad, had turned out to be excellent. Russia was always incalculable. But even this could have been dealt with; being an experienced businessman, who knew what he was doing, he had made all the necessary

arrangements, and in time. But the railways, which could not provide transport when he needed it, had upset all his calculations, so that the waiting ships still lay at anchor, some of them empty, in Brăila. The loss had amounted to over thirty per cent of the total value of the consignment. And then, on top of all this, had come this idiotic financial crisis, which had descended like a bolt from the blue, ruining all credit and paralysing all movement.

Iuga listened, but heard nothing. What mattered was that he would receive no money, the rest was mere words. Throughout the Armenian's explanations, he kept assuring himself that still, if insisted, the man would have to pay, for surely he could not allow a bill to be protested, and ruin his firm's good name. But to refuse this request would have meant finishing with a firm with which his father had traded for twenty years, and which had often helped them in difficult times. Could he possibly refuse? But then, if he accepted the delay, how could he settle with the 'Rumanian Bank' and, on top of that, how could he go home empty-handed? In the end, he had neither refused nor agreed, but said that he would give his answer the following day, after thinking it over.

On leaving the grain merchant, he had gone to see Dumescu at the Bank, to obtain advice and help. But the latter had been at an important meeting, and could not see him and Grigore had left a message inviting him out to dinner. He knew that Dumescu never discussed business outside the bank, but he thought that at least the ground could be prepared at a favourable moment. So he had taken Baloleanu along, too. Now, after the event, he realized that the whole arrangement, which had seemed so clever at the time, had in fact been foolish. If he had been wise, he would have waited till the next day, and have had dinner just with the young Transylvanian, so that by now he would have been asleep instead of uselessly tossing about.

After leaving Titu, as soon as he had entered his bedroom, his eyes had encountered the expression of Nadina's face in the photograph. He remembered with anger that it was because of her – before, he would have said 'for her' – that he had become indebted to the Rumanian Bank, just before she had given him her birthday present. He had thought then that the only reason why she refused to remain in the country more than twenty-four hours at a time was because she so disliked 'that old barn, without any taste or convenience' as she described the ancient manor house in Amara. He had dreamed of winning her over by building an elegant residence, fit to house such a beautiful creature. It had saddened old Miron that the manor, in which four generations of his ancestors had been reared, was no longer good enough for his son. Grigore's plans had seemed to the old man to presage the beginning of the decline, for

the building had been constructed from start to finish with money borrowed from the Bank. Nadina had considered his gesture to be very sweet, and had held housewarming parties for a fortnight, after which she had returned, bored, to Bucharest. After all, nobody could ask her to be buried alive, however luxurious the vault. Her photograph, a facsimile of the one which hung above his bed in town, but in a more suitable rural frame, remained to keep her 'Grig' company. There also remained his debt with the Bank, for he had been unable to repay even half the original sum in the three years which had passed.

It had been old Miron who had discovered Nadina, while Grigore had been in Berlin. Some twenty years ago, her father, Tudor Ionescu, had purchased two estates bordering on Amara, at Lespezi and Babaroaga, which had belonged to Teofil Iuga, Miron's brother. As soon as the documents had been signed, the new landlord, a very friendly man, had called on Miron, asking his advice as to the best way of working the land. This had, in fact, been a pretext for getting to know old Iuga, for he did not bother himself about the management of the estates; he had found a lease-holder and fixed the amount the latter would have to pay him even before he had concluded the bargain. Miron had later heard that Ionescu was a prosperous man, who had recently settled in Bucharest, where he had bought several houses; no one quite knew the origin of his wealth. A good many years later, at Easter, Ionescu had called on his neighbour again, accompanied this time by his son, Gogu and Nadina. There was a great difference in the age of the two young people. The son appeared to be over forty, while the girl looked barely twenty. Tudor Ionescu explained that he had been married three times; Gogu being the child of his first wife, and Nadina of his third. He went on to say that he had changed his lease-holder, and had taken this opportunity of bringing his children over, more especially as they were shortly to inherit the estates; Babaroaga was for Nadina and Lespezi for her brother. That was to be their portion for the time being; he intended to give them a house each in Bucharest when they got married. The rest of his property would be divided between them after his death. 'They won't have to wait very long - I'm seventy already,' he added, smiling, and without any melancholy. His only wish was to see them settled before he left them. He was a little worried about Gogu, however, for the latter had delayed marriage so long that it was now rather late. As for Nadina, there was no need to worry - a girl like her would not remain single, the young men would not allow it. Old Miron took a closer look at her, and agreed. In the three months which passed before Grigore returned from Germany, his father frequently thought of Nadina, the heiress to the Babaroaga estate. The splitting up of

his father's land had been a great grief to old Iuga; he would willingly have bought it himself if Teofil had not demanded cash. At least he could hope that Grigore might have the complete estate again, even if God had denied this to himself.

At that time Grigore had been twenty-four and had gone to Germany to study agronomy, having obtained a law degree in Bucharest – not to practise, but in order to have a qualification. He had left for three years, during the first of which his mother had died, whereupon the old man had asked him to stay at home and let all this science, which was a waste of time anyway, go to the devil. Only with difficulty had Grigore persuaded his father to let him return for another year.

When he had finally come home, his head had been full of daring plans and perfect solutions to every problem. He had expected his father to react angrily to all this, but to his surprise the old man had heard him out a couple of times, remarking merely that his exuberance was to be expected from youth, and that Grigore would return to normal after he had knocked his head against a brick-wall a few times. He did not oppose these theories, he merely commented one day that he would be pleased if the young man took to Tudor Ionescu's daughter. Grigore immediately saw what his father desired, and said that in choosing a companion for life was he not going to be influenced by any utopian ideas, it was no good trying to turn the clock back, however much one might want to.

'Just you meet the girl first, I'll take care of Utopia!' old Miron had said ironically.

And when Grigore had met her, he had forgotten everything, for she was all he could think of. During the month before their wedding, and the three they spent in Greece, Italy and Spain afterwards, he had discovered true happiness. Then Nadina had really been his wife, and only his. He wanted her always like that, with nothing and nobody in her heart except him. But then he had begun to suffer the torture of jealousy, all the more because he was ashamed to confess it. He had tried to persuade her to like the life in the country, not so much that she should love the land, but to shield his beloved from the temptations of the city. For four years his love had undergone every variety of suffering, until finally his hopes had collapsed. He had even agreed that his Nadina should go abroad alone, and for the second time. In the three months since she had left he had received only three letters, and each one asked for money.

In the light of his bedside lamp, Grigore stared at the silent shadows which filled the room with memories. Now and then he glanced again at Nadina, smiling at him from her frame, well pleased with herself.

He saw that it was two o'clock, and reflected bitterly: 'Here I am, day-dreaming about Nadina, and I have to meet Dumescu at nine in the morning. My God, what an idiot I am!'

6

By lunch-time the next day, however, Grigore had satisfactorily concluded his business. Dumescu, as amiable as ever, had cashed the Armenian's bill of exchange and accepted the amount Grigore had offered to the Bank. Iuga then called on Victor Predeleanu, his closest friend, and stayed on for lunch; he always felt at home there.

He was filled with relief at having solved all the problems which had assumed such awful proportions during the night. The horrors of sleeplessness do not only lie in the curtailment of rest, but also in the black thoughts it inspires, enveloping the sufferer in a net of gloom. In the happy atmosphere of the Predeleanu's, Grigore recalled his haunting fantasies of the previous night, and smiled to himself, albeit a little sadly. He recognized a habitual weakness in his eternal hesitation, which tore at his nerves and prevented him from facing life with confidence, as did his father, for instance, or even Predeleanu.

It was five in the afternoon by the time he reached home, and he had promised to meet the young Transylvanian at three! Where could he find him now? He was ashamed to hurt somebody who had perhaps relied on him, and asked the servant to make the lad stay if he called again, or, if he did not, ascertain his address.

He then went to see his Aunt Măriuca, widow of General Constantinescu, a lady who in the next world would not have forgiven him if he had been in Bucharest and not called on her. She was the soul of kindness and hospitality, always gay, and knew all the gossip in Rumania about affairs of the heart and military life. Grigore had lived at her place as a student, and old Miron still stayed with her when he was in Bucharest, even now. Since he refused to remain for dinner, she made him promise that he would come to lunch next day; then, she said, they would be alone and she would tell him a lot of important news.

The next day was Sunday, and Grigore rose late. As he hurried out, at his gate he met Titu Herdelea who, after a night of misery and disappointment, had come to try again. They made a new arrangement for that afternoon, to the great disgust of Aunt Măriuca, who thus had no time to tell him a quarter of what she had intended and felt to be necessary. In order to make up for defaulting the day before, Grigore stayed with Titu until quite late,

and invited him to come and have lunch next day at the Predeleanu's, having already given them notice on his way from his aunt's. He also promised Titu that he would go to Baloleanu's to enquire whether the lawyer had done anything about the *Universul*, and, on top of everything else, he invited the young man to stay with him on his estate for a week or two, or as long as he liked, until something was arranged in Bucharest, so as not to spend his money.

Only after he had arrived at Predeleanu's did Titu become convinced that he was not dreaming, and that Grigore had really meant what he said.

Both before and especially after lunch, Predeleanu was anxious to show his guest and Grigore's friend everything valuable in his library. He felt that a poet must be interested in rare editions, old Rumanian books with quaint notations, ancient documents and papers. He observed Titu's pleasure and felt that Grigore, who was not impressed with all this, should take him as an example.

Although he was a big landlord, and one who loved and worked his own land, Victor Predeleanu also had this house in the capital. On his estate at Delgar, in Dolj county, which covered three villages, he had actually achieved what Grigore had dreamed of, but which he had not been able to bring to fruition because of his father. Predeleanu's father, too, had been opposed to his son's ideas. At Craiova, where old Predeleanu had been born, lived and died, and had been considered one of the richest men, his meanness had become proverbial. Only after his father's death could Predeleanu employ a trained manager, introduce machines, reduce manual labour, and, in short, modernize the cultivation of the land which he had inherited. He still spent a large part of the year in the country, staying there for weeks at a time during the busy season. Towards the peasants he behaved correctly without being too friendly with them. He made such agreements as were traditional in those parts, neither burdening the peasants more than his neighbours, nor less. He had sold his peasants several hundred pogons, not because he needed to, for he was one of the few landlords who had no debts at all, but because he was prompted to a desire to emancipate them, and himself also. He was in the habit of saying that he would only be happy when he had got rid of the peasants and they had got rid of him.

His mother still lived in Craiova, with her daughter Elena, who had married a professor; young, good-looking, intelligent – and very poor. She had married for love, but only after the old man's death, for he would never have agreed to leave his fortune to a man with no property. It had been the same with Victor when he married; he had had to pit his will against that of the old gentleman, who would have liked to choose a daughter-in-law after his own

heart, that is, a young lady with a dowry at least as big as his son's. The only fortune Tecla had was her face and her family name. She was the daughter of the chairman of the local Court of Appeal, Nicolae Postelnicu, scion of a ruined family of boyars.

Although Victor had inherited his father's economic prudence, including his meanness, he liked to show off his library, rather than his agricultural knowledge. He was also proud of his paintings, a collection he had acquired a couple of years ago, and on which he did not hesitate to spend, even to lavish, money.

'Victor, let him have time to breathe, you'll be the death of him!' said Grigore, who was giving his attention to Mrs Predeleanu and her sister.

'I'm glad to observe that Mr Herdelea is not bored with fine books, as so many others are!' Predeleanu remarked sarcastically.

'What you mean is "like me"!' answered Grigore, nodding his comprehension. 'For myself, I prefer other types of beauty, especially in your house!'

Titu meanwhile had tried to protest, but timidly, as he feared to make a *faux-pas*; a fear, indeed, which had dominated him throughout the meal, so that Mrs Predeleanu had felt it necessary to encourage him from time to time, with a sweet smile. Tecla, who was rather tall and slender, had a caressing femininity which spread such serenity and good will that every place she graced with her presence seemed the brighter for it. Something of girlish candour still remained in her blue eyes. Although she had been married for nine years now, she still looked like a shy young girl, and her two sturdy children, playful Mircea and Ioana, would have seemed more like her brother and sister, if maternal pride had not shone so strongly in her eyes.

'Thank you for the compliment, if it was meant for us!' intervened her sister, with a kittenish impudence, 'but we won't accept it, because . . .'

'Then I'll withdraw as far as you are concerned, and offer it only to Tecla, for I am sure she won't refuse,' interrupted Grigore.

'That's right, I accept anything, even compliments!' said Mrs Predeleanu.

Her sister, Olga Postelnicu, was twenty; vivacious and as sweet as a turtle-dove, eternally smiling, which suited her very well. Her dark eyes, shining with curiosity, were shaded by long lashes; she had a small, saucy nose and rounded, fresh cheeks like a child's. Olga's parents and everyone else spoiled her. A little shorter than Tecla, she also had a slender figure, which could be seen to best advantage when she danced. She liked dancing better than anything else in the world; her dream was to become a ballerina.

'But Tecla, haven't you noticed,' she insisted with the stubbornness

of a child, 'that it was only a pretext to speak to Victor again about the peasant problem?'

Everybody laughed. It was true that Grigore had talked throughout lunch only of estates, lease-holders, peasants and agreements; more and more heatedly, although nobody had contradicted him. But now Mrs Predleanu intervened to stop him beginning again. Even Titu felt it was permissible to ask Grigore to relinquish this eternal peasant question, which was haunting him everywhere.

'I don't expect them to be interested, because I have bored them so many times already,' remarked Grigore resignedly, 'but I would have thought that you, who are still a stranger in these parts, would react differently!'

'But I'd rather talk to you about it on the spot,' young Herdelea answered, taking advantage of the situation to remind Grigore of this invitation.

'You can take it from me that you won't be able to avoid that even if you want to,' Grigore said loudly, and turning to the others, added: 'I'm going to take him to Amara to keep me company, and I shan't let him go until he is an expert on the peasant problem!'

Predleanu, who had replaced his treasures, remarked that they, too, were preparing to go to Delga for a fortnight, and would drop Olga at her home on the way, so that she would not become a stranger to their beloved Craiova.

'Do you think that I'm going back to Craiova now, when the season is just starting in Bucharest?' enquired that young lady indignantly.

For two years, since her coming out, Olga had spent more time in Bucharest than in Craiova. Victor wanted to find her a bridegroom who would also be acceptable to himself; being somewhat conceited, he imagined someone rather his own type. He was in the habit of saying to her: 'If you want to be really happy, you must wait until I say -- "Go"!'

Victor was dark, with a fine moustache, and slightly bulging eyes in which kindness shone more strongly than intelligence.

They went on to talk about Nadina, though the enquiries they made were of a formal character only; she had never really taken to the Predleanu's, and called only on special occasions, and then only because of Grigore. Her attitude was reciprocated. Nadina thought Tecla was a hypocrite, who did not understand a sophisticated life, while Tecla considered Nadina an adventuress. She had heard a good deal of gossip about Mrs Grigore Iuga, and was sure that there were many other things which she did not know, or wanted to know. Olga was the only member of the family who admired Nadina, and this in secret, for the latter was an excellent dancer, who always managed to find an opportunity for displaying her talent.

Grigore spoke humorously about his wife, but also with a certain

wistfulness. He told them that he saw almost less of her than of Olga, and that when they did meet they mostly talked business; she managed her estate so well, he said, that it always made a deficit, which, of course, he had to meet, just to show that he was her husband, and loved her. 'I hope she'll soon return from abroad, for the season is about to start, and she wouldn't miss it,' he added. Then, suddenly, in a different, heartbroken voice, he said: 'How I envy you, my friends! Your house is a happy home; I am a sentimentalist and always dreamed of something like this in my own marriage. At the bottom of my heart, the ideal woman for me was always someone like you, Tecla. I hope you don't mind, Victor?'

'On the contrary, you flatter me!' Predeleanu answered. 'That is, you flatter Tecla, and as Tecla is mine, and both of us are one . . .'

His wife merely smiled, and Iuga added: 'Yes, like you, with your smile, your gentleness, your children. How could I help envying you, Victor, especially when I think of myself . . .'

But, here, seeing that Grigore was becoming too despondent, Victor interrupted him by saying gaily: 'Well, Grigoriță, if only you hadn't been in such a hurry! Whose fault is it? Now I could show you an even more delightful wife than Tecla; look at her!'

Olga blushed to the roots of her hair, but laughed to cover her embarrassment. Grigore gave her a long look, and said: 'Yes, to be sure, who would have thought that the naughty girl of five years ago would grow up into such an attractive young lady! I'm awfully sorry about it, my dear Victor!'

'Don't be too hasty with your apologies, sir!' protested Olga, regaining her normal colour. 'You should first have enquired whether I would have accepted you! But as I am under discussion, I may tell you that my husband must be a gay fellow, smart, and above all a perfect dancer. Do you see? Not a sobersides like you!'

'Well done!' applauded Victor. 'It's just as well you have given yourself away. So you want a dancer? We might obtain one from the ballet, what do you say?'

Grigore looked at her steadily, as if the joke had turned up in his soul the fragments of a dream which had broken even as it took shape. Olga seemed to him to be a heightened version of Tecla, with all her qualities, but more vividly coloured. And beneath the sparkling of her eyes there lay a hint of tenderness. Then he shook his head as if to brush away his thoughts, and murmured slowly: 'Too late!'

7

'Mr Titu, I have a surprise for you!' exclaimed Mrs Alexandrescu, mysteriously stopping him in the parlour. 'Can you guess? Do come in.'

Young Herdelea had just left Grigore Iuga after the lunch at the Predeleanu's. So he looked neat and smart, like a bridegroom, in his best suit. Mrs Alexandrescu led him into her room, where a diminutive young lady awaited him, extremely blonde and wide-eyed, and very sweet-looking.

'Look,' said Mrs Alexandrescu, pointing at her triumphantly.

The young man kissed the stranger's hand ceremoniously, saying: 'I'm charmed to meet you, Madame Mimi!'

'However did you guess so quickly?' wondered Mrs Alexandrescu.

'From her beauty, and from something else too!' Titu answered.

Mimi smiled, flattered by the young man's nice manners. She gurgled: 'Mother told me you were a poet, and now I believe her.'

Both of them urged him to explain himself further, and Titu confessed that once he had looked through the bookcase in the parlour and come across a novel he had long wanted to read. Mrs Alexandrescu had told him he could look through her son-in-law's books, as long as he put everything back in the right place. On several pages in this particular novel he had found a question written in pencil: 'My own darling boy, do you love me?' He had thought that Mimi must have written the question to her future husband, and had tried to conjure up a picture of him. In his imagination, he said, he had seen her as she really was, and because he had not found any answer to that charming question in the book he had allowed himself to provide one: 'Indeed, I love you very much, my little sweet-heart.'

'Really?' exclaimed Mimi, pleasantly surprised. 'Actually, I don't remember writing it.'

'Now look here, Mr Titu,' interrupted Mrs Alexandrescu. 'You mustn't start making advances to Mimi, because my son-in-law is terribly jealous, and goodness knows what he would be capable of...'

'Don't be so silly, Mummy, you mustn't make him out to be as bad as all that. Mr Titu will think I have a boor for a husband!'

Titu protested that he would not believe any such thing, adding that it would be no wonder if the husband of such a charming young lady would commit a crime for her. He was then told that the lawyer had been transferred to a very good post in the Bucharest town council, and the couple had come over to look for a house, for in a fortnight or so he had to start work, so Mimi was staying in Bucharest a few days to find a decent place.

'I told you, didn't I, that he was very distinguished,' cried Mrs Alexandrescu. 'If only he was not so self-willed. Only a little while ago he brought Mimi up to the house, just entered and said "Bon jour", and cleared off! You know why, don't you?' Turning to her

daughter, she explained: 'I've told him about it, what I have to put up with because of my darling Jenică.'

Mimi changed the subject, and Titu came to her aid by offering his services in finding a new home, adding that he was afraid that he was soon leaving to visit the estate of one of his friends.

At other times he had not known how to get out of the place quick enough, but now he was reluctant to leave; Mimi struck him as both interesting and intriguing.

'Instead of looking after my affairs, which are serious matters, I occupy myself with trifles,' he said to himself when he was in his own room. 'She is undoubtedly quite pretty, but I haven't got the time now for such adventures.'

He did not know when he was to leave with Iuga, who had merely told him that it would be in two or three days, so he must be ready at any time. It was cold and dark in his room. The time was six o'clock. First he must change in order to save his good suit; really it was something to have a good suit, one felt different, more sure of oneself and of others. How lucky he had been to meet his landlady's daughter when he was wearing it! But that was enough. His head was full of Mimi, he must think of something else. Suddenly he remembered that the sole of his right shoe needed mending. He had nothing else to do, and it was cold; why not take it to the cobbler before it got any worse?

So straightaway he went, bare-headed to Mendelson, at the end of the yard. From the parlour he heard Mimi's voice twittering away, so she had not yet left. He knew the shoemaker, as well as all the other tenants who, all being poverty-stricken, formed a sort of huge family, although rather noisy and quarrelsome. Mendelson had two rooms, both facing the yard. One had a window and the other the entrance door. The workshop was the corner behind the door, where Mendelson hammered, sewed and grumbled all day, hunched up on his three-legged stool, consulting with his wife, or instructing his apprentice if there was no-one else to talk to. Although he had reached fifty, there was not a white strand in his bushy mop of dark hair - always untidy, like his beard. He boasted that he had learned his trade at Rapaport's, and his ardent desire was to get orders to make new shoes, but he was glad to mend, too, if he could but earn enough money. Titu found him hammering away energetically at a lady's shoe.

'Just a moment, Mr Herdelea,' he said, without interrupting his work. 'Just let me finish this heel for Mrs Tănăsescu, because she's going to the theatre tonight and see Mr Tănăsescu is waiting! Sit down for a minute. Mișu, where are you? Give Mr Herdelea a chair!'

Titu shook hands with Tănăsescu and Mișu. As he sat down he

observed that in the darkest corner of the room there sat a soldier whom he had never seen before.

After a short pause, the atmosphere relaxed and Tănăsescu took up the conversation where it had broken off: 'If there is justice, Mr Mișu, then we should start from the beginning! That's how it should be. Do justice to the peasant by all means, I've no objection, but don't let us insult those who, in the first place, have served the state all their lives, who have not stolen or made any pickings, and who have now reached a miserable old age.'

Tănăsescu who had a wife twenty-five years his junior, had been pensioned off a year ago. As Mișu gave him neither yea nor nay, he continued with growing anger: 'It's neither just nor decent that people like me, who slaved for you until we were squeezed out like a lemon, should be forced to lower ourselves in our declining years!'

Mendelson, a keen socialist, who had been arrested and beaten up several times by the police, answered, without lifting his eyes from his work: 'Justice has no price, and that's why there is no demand for it in the trade.'

But Mișu burst out loudly and reproachfully: 'Mr Tănăsescu, if you complain about injustice and suffering, think what it must be like in the countryside, where no ray of hope ever penetrates!'

The pensioner, beside himself with rage, burst out: 'I'm sick of hearing about your stupid peasants, d'you understand? They at least get enough food, clothing and rest. You can't pull the wool over my eyes with your peasants, because I know what it's like in the country. You should concern yourself a bit more about us in the town; it's we who carry the burden, and God knows what we go through!'

And so he went on, bewailing the fact that he had been an honest worker, and not made a pile on the side, like the others had done – now he would care for nothing and nobody else – and so on until Mendelson handed him the shoe, repaired and polished like a mirror.

'You can't have an objective conversation with the old boy; he's unable to see any further than his pension,' Mișu remarked ironically when Tănăsescu had left. 'After a matter of fact, these clerks and pensioners are the pillar of our bourgeoisie, and that's really why he thinks that the state should take special care of them and give them everything. Do you approve of things as they are, Mr Herdelea?'

'I don't know enough about things over here to give an opinion,' answered Titu, 'but I know that there is injustice everywhere, in different forms. Over there it's one way, here it's another.'

'But in other parts, people fight against it; they do something and make their voices heard, whereas here we just accept it as a normal state of affairs! That's the point!'

'Sometimes it is useless to fight, too!' murmured Titu with conviction.

'But that is worse than anything, sir!' cried Mişu. 'That's resignation! I thought you in Transylvania were more determined to see justice triumph!'

A paraffin lamp hung from the ceiling and illuminated the little table covered with wooden pins, lasts and tools, leaving the rest of the room in semi-darkness, in which even people seemed like shadows. The lean figure of Mişu, gesturing violently, seemed to be fighting the darkness. Titu stayed a while talking to him and his father. He understood that their revolt sprang from their poverty, and he agreed with them, though, being a reserved creature, he could not express his own woes in bitter words; he kept them within to torture his soul. Moreover, he had heard from Gavrilăş that the secret police kept their eye on Mendelson, and he was not anxious to join his voice to theirs and get mixed up in goodness knows what.

'Sober down, Mişu; you're a soldier, you might get into trouble!' the older man said suddenly, as if alarmed at his son's ardour.

'Well, and if I am a soldier! Can't I have an honest opinion? Anyway, I'll be out of the army in ten days, and even before that why should I be careful in front of Mr Herdelea? Isn't he working class like us?'

'Yes, genuinely so!' agreed Titu, half in earnest. 'So much so, in fact, that I'm kicking my heels and hoping for a job!'

After a somewhat awkward silence, Mişu continued, more calmly: 'At least we should keep the right to complain when we are among ourselves, otherwise . . . What do you say, friend Petre?'

The last query he addressed to the soldier sitting silently in the darkest corner, on the edge of the boards of the wooden bed, his cap on his knees, motionless as if made of stone. Startled at the question, he began to rise, but then realized where he was, and settled down even more firmly. His voice when he answered was deep and strange, as if from another world.

'Well . . .'

Titu turned his head to look, amazed. All he could make out in the shadow was a bony, rather dark face, with two flaming eyes set in it. He held his soldier's cap awkwardly in his two large knobbly hands as if afraid he would crush it.

'This is a fellow soldier of mine,' explained Mişu. 'We started service in the same battery, and became friends. He's a good chap; they made him a corporal - look at the stripes! Corporal Petre Petre; the whole regiment knows him.'

'Petre Petre!' repeated Titu to himself. 'What a name!'

He felt he must say something to the stranger, so that he should not seem superior.

'I don't think you come from Bucharest, do you?'

'Oh, no!' said the soldier quickly and firmly, as if denying a shameful thing. 'I'm from the country, from Argeş.'

'I see, I thought so.'

Titu was not familiar with the local geography, and racked his brains to remember where Argeş was. He added hesitantly: 'Somewhere near Piteşti, isn't it?'

'That's right, near Piteşti,' agreed the soldier, brightening. 'Amara village; you can get there by taking a train from here to Costeşti, where you change into the train for Roşiori. You get off at Burdea, and then you are in Amara in no time.'

Herdelea remembered that it was Amara that Grigore Iuga had mentioned. Perhaps this soldier was actually from the Iuga estate. It was on the tip of his tongue to enquire whether he had heard of a young man called Iuga, but he was shy in front of Mendelson, who might have thought that he was showing off his boyar acquaintances.

'Are you glad to be leaving the army?' he suddenly asked.

'Well, I haven't had too bad a time there; I can't complain,' answered Petre Petre, slowly and seriously. 'But still, it's better at home, because, you see, for a fellow from the country . . .'

He became confused, and fell silent.

'Of course,' Titu went on, helping him out. 'Everybody feels best in his own home and field. Have you got any land?'

'We haven't got much land, and we need more badly,' answered the soldier eagerly. 'There are rumours here that the boyars will have a little pity and . . .'

'You hear that, Mr Herdelea?' cried Mişu, mockingly. 'You like that? Their hope is the boyars; that the boyars will have pity!'

Petre Petre looked startled. He could not understand Mişu's irony. He said slowly, and simply: 'Who should we look to, if not to the boyars? To people who haven't got anything? Those who have nothing can give easily, for they lose nothing.'

'Then you'll wait a long time!' remarked Mişu contemptuously.

'We'll wait and we'll see!' muttered Petre Petre, lowering his eyes to his cap, which he had crumpled up completely.

Before leaving, Titu shook hands all round. Petre's hand was rough and scamy, like the earth itself.

Chapter Two

THE LAND

I

The familiar yellow chaise from Amara was waiting at the miserable, lonely station of Burdea, which stands in the middle of a field on the Costești-Roșiori line. As soon as the train drew to a halt, a boy hurried up to the carriage door which framed the figure of Grigore Iuga, collected his luggage, and took it to the chaise. There Ichim, the venerable, talkative family coachman, was firmly holding the reins of two restless horses, which chewed at the bit and pawed the stones, impatient to be off.

'Welcome home, master!'

'Glad to see you, Ichim,' replied Grigore, settling himself next to young Herdelea. 'Is everything all right at home?'

'Yes, master, and health with it!'

'Good. Then off we go!'

With an energetic 'Giddy-up there!' from the old man, the horses started off so suddenly that the boy, sitting next to him, almost fell over backwards. A short way beyond the station the chaise turned on to a rough road, which cut across a field to Curteanca village. Straight ahead on the lead-coloured horizon, the village appeared like a great mole-hill. All round it spread endless stretches of golden stubble, lying quiet and smooth. Here and there, dotting the land, could be seen flocks of resting crows. The sky, neatly arranged with the clouds of autumn, hung heavily over the earth, as if pressing its edge upon the horizon. An occasional tree stood straight up, marking the main road between Costești and Roșiori.

On entering Curteanca, Grigore suddenly said to Titu: 'That is the house of Popescu-Ciociul. All the way from the station we have been travelling on his land. Only a few years ago he was the lease-holder of this estate. He must have worked very hard for himself, for he pushed his landlord off the place and installed himself instead. Maybe the landlord deserved his fate - I never saw him on the estate.'

The village was just a few cottages with the manor house in the

middle; a shapeless building with a square tower, painted dark red all over, surrounded by its outbuildings. The road to Amara crossed the mainroad at Curteanca, passing the manor and running towards the verge of the Teleorman valley, which dropped obliquely some hundred and eighty feet, like a cliff. The valley itself was almost a mile wide, smooth as the palm of one's hand, and with rich, fertile land, like an endless ribbon of vegetable gardens, but no sign of a river.

'Stop, Ichim!' called Iuga at the beginning of the descent, and then turned to Titu, saying with some emotion: 'I want to show you our land; that which was ours and that which remains. You can see all of it from here as if it were on a map.'

Beyond the Teleorman valley, which now lay beneath them, the earth curved, long and smooth, like a great back.

'The Teleorman river marks the border on this side,' said Grigore, rising from his seat and following with his finger the gently winding course of the valley. 'From Ionești village, which you can see over there, on the left, as far as that, down there on the right, where the Cîine Valley runs into it: that's where the other border is. The whole tongue of land between these two rivers once all belonged to the Iuga estate. Today, not even half of it is ours. Actually, it was quite a respectable size, over twenty thousand pogons. Can you see that village beyond the river, straight ahead, right in our path? That's Babaroaga. Beyond Babaroaga, there's another village, Gliganu Nou, you can just see the glitter of the tin on the new church tower; there, a little higher, among that clump of trees. Well, the part on the left of the road was the first to go. My great-grandfather gave it to his daughter for her dowry. Now they call it the Vlăduța estate, because the manor is in Vlăduța. Today its owner is a man called Stănoiu who isn't even in the country, he's in Italy, I don't know what he's doing there, they say he's a diplomat. A retired colonel, Ștefănescu, looks after his estate, a very nice man, with three daughters; somehow he can't marry them off, although they are pretty, and they have dowries into the bargain. Everything else was in one piece until my grandfather died. Then the estate was divided between my father and his brother Teofil, and after that Teofil gradually sold his share. Once, not so long ago, all this land was just called "the Amara estate" or "the Iuga estate". Now the Amara estate is just the tip of the tongue, the lower part. I'll show you when we get nearer. To the right of Babaroaga village is my wife's estate, two-and-a-half-thousand pogons, running down as far as the road you can see further down, between Găujani and Bîrlogu. Over there, beyond Nadina's estate, towards the Cîine Valley, and down to Lespezi village, runs the Lespezi estate, which belongs to Gogu, my brother-in-law and your benefactor. Both

these estates have been leased to the same man, a Greek called Platamonu, since old Ionescu stopped looking after them. He's a hard-working, efficient man, pays in his money regularly, and prospers under your very eyes. Yet for all that – or perhaps just because of it – he isn't very popular, though it's true he doesn't seem to mind, he just looks after his own affairs. Well, then there comes the Vaideci estate, straight on from Lespezi, between Amara and the Ciine Valley – some two thousand pogons. It belongs to a bank in Bucharest, but a Moldavian lease-holder has been exploiting it for some years – Cosma Buruiană. He's not a bad chap, goodness knows how he came to these parts. He runs about and sweats a lot, and is always terribly busy, but all to no good, because every time he has to pay in the rent for the quarter, he is in a hole. Father likes him, and praises him very much, but, of course, that's just because he always loses. Everything else that remains between the two rivers is ours; that is, apart from a corner of about four hundred pogons round Izvoru village, over there where the rivers meet. That belongs to the Ghica estate. Things have got so divided up that we have started calling everything by the name of the nearest village: the Ruginoasa estate; the Amara estate; the Birlogu estate, and so on. I'll explain it to you when we reach Lespezi; it is right on the back of the hill, so you can look down from there to Izvoru, sometimes even as far as Teleorman county, which is some miles from Izvoru. Go on Ichim: let's go through Gliganu and stop for a while up in Lespezi.'

But before they had started, Grigore called out: 'Stop, stop, just one minute! Let's take the opportunity of seeing who are our neighbours on the other side. You might meet them while you are staying with us; at least, you should know where they come from. I've told you about Colonel Stănescu, haven't I? Well, let's go on along the right. At Găujani village there is nobody. In the next place, Humele, General Dardălat of Pitești, has got a small estate, very well cared for, with manor-house like a little sugar-bun. Further down, near the road, on that hill, you can see another hamlet and a manor; that is the Goia estate, also only a few hundred pogons. It belongs to Ioniță Rontompan, a good friend of my father's, a real boyar, working hard, close to the earth. He has a daughter married to a magistrate in Roșiori. At Orodclu, further down the valley in the direction of Izvoru, on this side of the river, is the Perticari estate with a mansion and grounds which are worth a visit; perhaps we'll go over there so that you can see for yourself if we have time. Of course, the estate is leased out, but the house and grounds are kept for the owner, and he quite often comes over to enjoy himself.

'The estate of the Matei Ghica family stretches from Izvoru down

as far as Teleorman county, and is looked after by a manager, a man who in four years has procured himself an estate of his own near Bucharest, but he only seems to be able to lose money for the owner here. At Izvoru, too, there is a nice, comfortable manor whose owners come here as soon as the spring arrives, and stay until late autumn. But we don't have anything to do with them. I don't know why, it's always been like that. And that's all – go on Ichim.'

Grigore felt at ease, talking and explaining volubly, with a pleasure that softened his voice. Titu Herdelea looked, listened, and said nothing.

The chaise started off again, the horses trotting more slowly. Here the road descended in a steep serpentine bend, for the ground dropped away as sharply as a cliff falls to the ocean below.

'That's how our rivers are,' remarked Iuga, noticing his companion's bewilderment at seeing no sign of water anywhere. 'You can walk right across them practically all through the year; they might even dry up completely, but when they are in full spate, which sometimes happens in the spring, then they reach from bank to bank, like the Danube itself. That doesn't happen often, though. So that's why, as you can see, we don't even need a foot-bridge. Up on the high road, at Ionești, they did put up a bridge in case the need arose, but it got broken a couple of years ago. Nobody has repaired it, and everybody crosses just as we do here. The stream in Cîine Valley is more dangerous; it does damage nearly every year and never dries up!'

They passed across the valley. The ribbon of the road unwound straight ahead, and in a couple of minutes they had entered Babaroaga, a miserable village with two streets forming a junction, several squalid cottages, many children, animals in the back-yards, an occasional stunted, miserable peasant and, on a small mound on the outskirts, a wooden church, like a broken toy. Titu Herdelea opened his mouth to ask a question, but Grigore anticipated him: 'Once only the cottages of the peasants working on the estate stood here. Then the village just grew, without anybody having a hand in it; that's why it looks the way it does.'

After they had left Babaroaga behind, he continued: 'Did you notice the cross-roads in the centre of the place? The road on the left leads to Ionești, and on to Costești; the one on the right crosses Nadina's estate, towards Bîrlogu village. Bîrlogu belongs to us, except for the manor buildings, as the peasants call them, on the outskirts. They are only used for storage now; the lease-holder lives in Gliganu, and on the odd occasions that my wife came here before we married she always stayed at the manor at Lespezi, her brother's place, which is more respectable, anyway.'

For a further quarter of an hour the horses trotted along between the Vlăduța estate, which lay on the left, and Babaroaga, on the right. The road was monotonous; the same dreary, flat land, broken only by furrows of stunted green winter wheat, like a covering of hair on a body stiffened with cold.

'Look, that's where Platamonu lives, he's leased Nadina's and Gogu's estates,' Grigore recommenced, as they reached Gliganu village, pointing to a great courtyard on the left, surrounded by a fence. In its centre, white, red-roofed buildings were just visible through the withering foliage of the trees around them.

A lean man with a sun-burnt face and a lively, energetic appearance came out at that moment through the wide-open gate. He wore an ancient hat and a short leather jacket, and his top-boots were of the softest leather round the calves. Hearing the bells of the horses in the Amara chaise, he paused on the foot-bridge in front of his gate and gave a respectful, ceremonious salute: 'Welcome, Master Grigoriță! I'm glad to see you back!'

Iuga's response, as he lifted his hat, was very cool.

'The lease-holder?' whispered Titu, eyeing the figure on the foot-bridge.

Grigore nodded, and when they were a little further on, murmured: 'I don't like the man, although he has never done me any harm.'

Then, resuming his normal voice, he added: 'Here's another cross-roads. We're nearly through the village now. If we were to go straight on we would come to the estate of my brother-in-law, Gogu Ionescu. Beyond that, passing through the Ciine Valley, you come to Upper Gliganu, and then Rociu village, on the Pitești-Fierbintî road, where our present prefect, Boerescu, has a beautiful estate. The road on the left comes from Serbănești; Gogu's estate stretches across to it. But we are going to turn right, towards Lespezi and Amara. Nadina's property touches this road we're on now, and on the left Gogu's land continues.'

About half-way between Gliganu and Lespezi, the coachman stopped, as instructed. From here the land sloped down slightly to the meeting of the valleys. The air was clearer now and they could get a better view; in the east a patch of blue had appeared in the sky.

'And now let me show you the rest!' Grigore went on. 'On your left you can see the Ciine Valley. Right ahead, in the direction of Lespezi, is the end of Gogu's estate, and the Vaideci land begins. Beyond Lespezi you can see the road to Amara - we'll soon be there - a bigger, more presentable village. The road, going on to Ciine Valley, forms the boundary of the Vaideci estate. Everything on its right side belongs to us as far as the next valley, Teleorman,

that we saw before. On our right, here, near that little nest of cottages, is Birlogu. Up to that point – that is the road between Lespezi and Birlogu – Nadina's land runs, with the Teleorman Valley as the boundary on the other side. As you can see, on our way here the road almost encircled my wife's estate. Between Birlogu and Amara, further down the valley, you can see another village, Ruginoasa, right in the middle of our land.

'That's where the out-houses are, where we keep the implements and the more valuable tools. On the horizon you can see Izvoru village. That red patch over there is the roof of the Ghiculești mansion. That wood to the left of Izvoru belongs to us – there are about three hundred pogons; all that could be saved. A hundred years ago Amara stood on the edge of the forest which covered all this area. Look over there on the left, in the Ciine Valley – you can see Vaideei village, too. The road there – that one looking like a white ribbon – goes on to Mozăceni. Nearer, but still across the stream, you can see Cantacuză village quite well. That estate has over three thousand pogons and is said to have belonged to the Cantacuzino's, but today it is in the hands of a captain from Pitești, Lache Grădinaru. As a matter of fact, wherever you go, you'll find only boyars' estates around there. There's Buta, beyond it is Negrași, Zidurile and Dumbrăveni.'

At Lespezi, Grigore showed Herdelea Gogu's manor, which looked well kept, for Gogu did come here from time to time, brought by his wife, who loved country life, at least as a change from the parties they had in Bucharest.

Finally they reached Amara. This larger village was dominated by the same poverty, had the same straw-thatched cottages, and the same weed-choked yards. Grigore, however, with genuine pride, drew Titu's attention to the stone-built church with its gleaming tower, which had been raised by his grandfather. He then pointed out the new school, built by his father. Down a little lane he indicated the manor belonging to the Vaideei estate; before the estate was broken up it had been the servants' quarters, but now Cosma Buruiană, the lease-holder, was living in it.

'Stop, Ichim, let's get down here, so that this gentleman can see everything we have here!' Grigore called out suddenly, jumping down from the chaise. Titu followed him. 'You just go on!' Grigore added to the coachman.

On the right ran a wooden fence, supported by square brick pillars at intervals, the fence of the Iuga manor itself. Behind, a row of ancient poplars stood on guard like a line of soldiers. Through the gate, which stood open, could be seen the yard, the dwellings of the caretakers, farmhands and other servants, together with the stables, sties and barns. A hundred steps beyond was the main

entrance, high and wide, with three brickwork arches joined above to form a dovecote.

As Grigore entered with Titu, he said sadly: 'Now you will see what love can do!'

At the end of the drive of young firs the new villa appeared, like the smile of a lovely woman. Titu knew that Grigore had built it for Nadina. It was white, with a big pleasant veranda, generous windows, and four little arrow-shaped towers as if for defence. Ivy was creeping over it and in some places had reached the windows on the upper floor. The drive broadened to meet a heart-shaped flower bed blazing with red blooms in front of the house.

'You must ignore this fancy of a blossoming heart!' remarked the host, smiling, as he observed Titu eyeing the flower-bed. 'It was a poor lover's notion, and you know what lover's tastes are! I have it kept and tended just to convince myself that I've not given up loving.'

He laughed dryly, and then continued in a different tone: 'If you want to really know your way about the place, I suggest we walk around it, so that you'll see everything. I hope I'm not boring you with so many explanations. It is for the first and last time.'

The new house stood in its own grounds, which were carefully looked after by Grigore himself. It was he who had introduced the firs, which, as a matter of fact, did not take to the soil in this flat land. Paths covered with fine sand and gravel twisted between arbours, flower-beds, clumps of special shrubs and lawns mowed every week. The hedge which surrounded the grounds was reinforced with wire-netting to keep out the poultry from the adjoining yard. Only the doves could fly freely over the paths and in front of the villa, but even they were more timid here than among the many animals in the farmyard.

Iuga and Herdelea went to the right. About a hundred yards to the rear of the villa stood the old manor house; huge, low and ancient, as if its base were firmly rooted in the earth. A pillared veranda embellished the front like a classical portico. Old Iuga continued to live in this house, where he had been born, and because he lived in the country almost all the time the old place seemed to have more life than the new one.

'And that is our kingdom!' announced Grigore, when they reached the front of the villa again, where the coachman's lad waited, to show that he had unloaded everything from the chaise.

A question which somehow he hesitated to ask had long been burning on Titu Herdelea's lips. And now, when Grigore's descriptions seemed to be finishing, the intensity of it hurt him. He suddenly said, with a keen glance: 'You've shown me a lot of boyars' estates, all big and very fine. But where is the land belonging to the people?'

Iuga started. He had not expected the question at that moment, although while he had been talking during the journey it had passed through his mind several times that Titu might ask it and he had even been surprised that his guest had not done so. He quickly recovered and replied: 'You see, this "land belonging to the people", this is the peasant question . . . Land! They don't have very much, and what they did have has disappeared. But that's another story.'

Although Herdelea did not understand, he did not press the matter, for he felt that he had opened an old wound.

2

'Welcome, young man; make yourself at home!' Miron Iuga said, interrupting Grigore's introduction and stifling the formal reply which Titu had prepared in the train.

The old man, in a long dressing gown like a Turkish caftan, shook hands firmly with the young visitor, looking straight into his eyes as if weighing him up on the instant, for ever. They were black, penetrating eyes which bored deep into one's soul and read one's thoughts. Old Iuga was taller and more handsome than his son, with the easy look of a man used to giving orders and receiving obedience. A thick Rumanian-style moustache, now slightly grey, embellished his face; and he had a metallic, incisive, yet warm, voice which won the listener. His strong, bony hands looked as if they could manage a plough, even though they were sensitive, with especially fine fingers.

He gestured to his guest to take a chair near him, and then looked inquiringly at his son. Grigore knew that the old man was impatient to hear what he had arranged in Bucharest. He told his father of his troubles and how, thanks to the exceptional helpfulness of Dumescu, he had managed to return with a fuller purse than he had hoped.

'I see; Dumescu again!' murmured old Iuga, pleased. 'It is only old friends who stand by one in time of need. But you were right not to finish off the Armenian, very right!'

He continued to study Grigore for a moment, and then turned to Titu, who had been deeply impressed by the appearance and welcome offered by the old man. Miron Iuga asked him about his parents and his family, and when and why he had crossed the Carpathians. On hearing that the young man composed verse, and wished to write for the newspapers, old Iuga made a gesture of contempt. Both Titu and Grigore noticed this, and were taken aback. In order to bring him round, Titu began to talk about the Hungarians, about the persecutions suffered by the Rumanians,

and similar matters he felt were certain to touch a responsive chord. The old man listened attentively, and finally remarked: 'Precisely because the people are having a difficult time with the powers-that-be, their leaders must not desert them. I like the Transylvanians who come over here, it's true, but I like the ones who stay there even better. They face up to the difficulties and call down upon themselves the arrows of the oppressors, so that the people are protected. The mass of the people cannot live without leaders; otherwise they just vegetate in an animal world. The shepherd who deserts his flock is worse than the one who leads it astray, because the flock left on its own is lost, while if it has a shepherd, whether he be good or bad, it is never lost!'

Grigore, embarrassed, especially seeing that Titu's colour came and went, interrupted his father, protesting: 'That's all very well, father, but you seem to be reproaching him because his desire for freedom was so strong that he came here to us, where, in any case, he has more opportunity to develop his talent. Don't forget that precisely because fate has divided the Rumanian nation into so many different parts, ruled by foreigners, it must actively preserve at least the unity of the soul, which can be done only by poets and bards.'

'Very true!' old Miron agreed. 'But if all the poets and bards, as you call them, move to Bucharest, into freedom, then what happens to the people who are left behind? Of course, unity is necessary, but not just unity between the poets; it must be unity for the many. In fact, the poets will write even more convincingly there, for they too will be sharing the burden, while here patriotism becomes just something to show off!'

'You're quite mistaken, father!' Grigore insisted, his tone growing more and more heated. 'The unity of the soul is first of all created by a common language and if our writers stay buried in their own provinces, we shall be fated inevitably to have more and more pronounced differences in our language, and ultimately brother will not understand brother!'

Unmoved, and still in a calm voice, old Iuga continued: 'We have existed for a thousand years or so, and lived through times which were probably worse than these, and yet I see that we have all preserved the same language, both here and in Transylvania. Our literature, whether prolific or not, whether good or bad, has still spread beyond the border dividing us, and will undoubtedly continue to do so. And the writers did their duty each in his own place, each one according to his capabilities. But I cannot accept desertion, under any form or for any reason. Tomorrow, or whenever the hour strikes and we take Transylvania, I need capable leaders there, leaders who have sprung from among the people, and who can turn their hand to managing the country.'

The discussion continued without anyone relinquishing his convictions. Young Herdelea listened with a vague, timid smile, inwardly approving and even agreeing with both. He was most relieved when the lease-holder of the Vaideei estate, whom Miron had summoned, was announced.

Cosma Buruiană was a man of thirty-five. He had seven children, and a pretty wife who promised to increase this number still more. He had been a steward on various estates in Teleorman county until four years ago, when God had at last smiled upon him and he had leased the Vaideei estate from the Agrarian Bank, at a modest rent for the region. Many years ago, while he was working on the Stănescu estate, he had been badly beaten up by people who complained that he had cheated them with the tithe. Since then he had been terrified of the peasants.

'What have I always told you, Mr Miron, sir?' he said, immediately upon seating himself, with a vinegary expression on his face. 'Have you heard what has happened to me? No, of course, you haven't, because I have only just found out myself. They've robbed me, Mr Miron! At least half a wagon-load of maize, last night, from the new barn! The watchmen don't know anything, didn't see anything, neither do the caretakers; nobody knows how it was done or who did it. There must have been a whole bunch of them walking in and out all night. Only last week I took that maize for tithe; justly, and in the right proportions - you know me, sir, don't you? Now you can see how my luck goes!'

Miron Iuga grew serious and gloomy on hearing the lease-holder's complaint - unlike Grigore, whose face bore something of a sneer. The old man sympathized with Buruiană because of his large loss, but the event itself made him think deeply.

If the peasants came to steal in groups, and such a big quantity, too - even if it were not as big as Buruiană would have him believe - it was a bad omen. If one of them stole alone, well, whether he got away with it or not, it was not important, just an isolated case. But when people got together to steal, it marked a change.

'Now you see the results of these winter evening gatherings which you encouraged so much with the peasants!' said Miron emphatically, addressing his son. 'As long as the peasant knew that he had to agree with the landlord, so that both might live, everything was all right. But since you've started telling him all sorts of nonsense, things like this have started. And, mind you, this is only the beginning! You may be sure that more will follow, and it will be even worse.'

'Don't exaggerate, father,' Grigore retorted, in a faintly sarcastic tone. 'The peasants have stolen before and from other people too. Men have stolen ever since the beginning of the world. Why draw such portentous conclusions from such a common event?'

Old Iuga did not bother to reply. He knew Grigore's attitude very well, the boy would find an explanation or excuse for anything. After gazing thoughtfully into space for a few moments he came to a sudden decision and exclaimed: 'Send me the mayor and the local police sergeant. They must find the thieves immediately, wherever they are! As to the rest, we'll see about that later . . . Fine watchmen you have, I must say! They should be thrashed first until they admit who the miscreants are. Yes, yes, I'm willing to bet on it, they know who it is – that is, if they're not mixed up in it themselves!'

The lease-holder crossed himself, horrified: 'For God's sake, Mr Miron, do you want them to set fire to everything and ruin me completely? You see what happens to me even when I handle them as tenderly as a sore spot? Imagine what would happen if I dealt with them roughly – God forbid! I just came to tell you how I have suffered, like I would a father who helped and looked after me, but . . .'

'I'll deal with the matter personally!' growled the old man, interrupting him. 'I consider it to be particularly important.'

The other two remained silent; Grigore did not want to interfere as old Miron was so determined, while Titu, still upset after his recent ordeal, paid no attention to this controversy.

Actually, Miron Iuga had called Buruiană in over another matter, but now only the theft interested him. After a pause he went on, speaking as to himself, and not looking at anybody: 'After all it isn't the first time people have stolen like gipsies. Only last autumn there were five incidents: two of them concerned us – little things, but nevertheless, they happened.'

He relapsed into silence again, turning things over in his mind, and finally declared firmly, as if he had found the right answer: 'The evil must be torn out by its roots! If we make an example now, in good time, it will be more effective than violent repression later on, when the infection is more serious and widespread.'

Cosma Buruiană, frightened at the turn matters had taken, for he had only intended to demonstrate his bad luck to the boyar, tried to smooth things down a little: 'The peasants have changed a lot, Mr Miron, sir! They've woken up, and they're too cunning. As a matter of fact, everybody is too clever by far these days, and that's why things go from bad to worse. Once the peasant wakes up, he wants land and he says so all the time; he doesn't care whether it can be got or not, he just keeps on about it.'

Now that things had calmed down a little, Titu thought it was the right moment to observe mildly: 'That's how the peasant is, everywhere. It's the same in Transylvania: he's never satisfied. And that's how it should be, because as long as he loves the land so desperately, nobody will manage to take it away from him.'

At this, the old man shot him such a long, ironical glance, that Titu stopped and lowered his eyes in perplexity, unable to understand what he had said that was wrong to cause such displeasure. The lease-holder, however, in order to pacify the boyar, said ingratiatingly: 'But in your part of the world things are different Mr . . .' Not being sure of Titu's name, he mumbled an appropriate noise in its place. 'There, the land has to be taken from a foreigner, who has wrested it from you over centuries. Here, the land has belonged to the boyars for generations, and they have kept it and defended it against every threat.'

'You can be sure that what has happened over there will happen here before long, too!' remarked Grigore cuttingly. 'Look at the present state of things – more than half of the boyars' land is in the hands of aliens, who have every thing except love of land. God knows what will happen in the future. I still believe that it would be better for the country if the estates were to get into the hands of the peasants, because it is harder for aliens to take the land away from them than from us – if for no other reason than that they are many!'

The old man gave Grigore the same look that he had given Titu, but did not answer him either. It seemed so obvious to him that his son was talking nonsense that he wondered how such an intelligent young man could fail to see it himself.

Buruiană, however, feeling that Grigore's words had been addressed to him as well, answered masking his indignation with dulcet tones: 'Master Grigoriță, really it's a sin to talk like that! What you say as a joke will come true, you may be sure! On my word! People's heads are stuffed with notions about becoming the masters of the boyars' land, and you'll see that it will happen. Haven't you noticed that the moment they hear that a big estate is to be sold, they rush to buy it and divide it up. Right here, for example – I was just going to tell you, Mr Miron. There are rumours flying around that the peasants are going to buy Madame Nadina's estate!'

Miron Iuga suddenly raised his head, astounded: 'What did you say? Buy it? Surely it must be for sale before it can be purchased!'

'People say it is for sale!'

'Did you hear that, Grigoriță?' the old man sneered.

'Yes, I did,' answered his son, shrugging his shoulders.

'I think the news started from Platamonu,' the lease-holder continued portentously, 'as far as I could gather from various people, he himself wants to buy, and the peasants are saying, "Why should a Greek buy it, and not us?"'

'Tell me, Grigoriță, how do these rumours start?' old Miron enquired, this time with irritation. 'Would-be buyers are swarming round your wife's estate, and you seem to know nothing about it.'

There must be something in it, because people don't go mad just like that!

'That's true enough, sir!' interjected Buruiană. 'And people say that Madame Nadina herself told the Greek that she was not going to prolong his lease whatever he offered, even if he doubled his payments, because she was determined to sell it, so that she could get rid of all the bother, the leases, the rents, the peasants and everything else. That's how things stand, Mr Miron!'

Old Iuga was even more deeply affected by this piece of news than by the theft. He pressed the lease-holder for more information, but he knew nothing else. Then Miron suddenly grew silent again, and said no more. The butler announced dinner and Buruiană, rising to leave, nervously remarked: 'You did ask for me, Mr Miron, so as to tell me something, and here I've been just keeping on about my own troubles. Please excuse me, sir.'

Miron tried to remember what he had called the man for, and his inability to do so infuriated him even more. He sought for some suitable phrase in order to dismiss the lease-holder tactfully, but could not think of anything. Finally he murmured wearily, without looking at Buruiană: 'Well, God be with you, you've given me enough bad news.'

3

Titu Herdelea did not recover properly until he reached his room after dinner. Everything had been made ready for him, and Grigore, leading him there, explained that he shouldn't take everything the old man said too seriously, because he had always been like that – unusual both in his opinions and his ways, but with a wonderfully good heart. Young Iuga was anxious that Titu should not take too much notice of his father's behaviour, but he himself had sat on tenterhooks throughout the meal, his food sticking in his throat, for old Miron had been even more gruff, ignoring Titu completely and spending the whole time arguing with his son over trifles.

Herdelea's room was on the first floor of the new building, with a window opening on to the farmyard belonging to the old manor, and another looking over the grounds. Leaving his guest, Grigore returned to his father in the old manor, where they had eaten. Young Iuga too, had spent his life there. Only when he had guests did he sleep in the new villa, to keep them company and so that the villa should not seem deserted. He showed Titu Nadina's elegant boudoir in the other wing, in which her photograph reigned.

Young Herdelea occupied himself in pottering about, hoping that Grigore would soon come back to talk to him, but after a while he

remembered that they had bidden each other good-night, and so he was free to do what he wanted until the next morning. It was quite late, and the sound of the good fire burning in the stove was an invitation to sleep. He thought the best thing to do was to go to bed.

The next morning he rose earlier than was his habit in Bucharest. Everybody else, of course, had been up for a long time. He spent the morning hanging about the old manor, for Grigore was busy settling certain accounts with Isbăşescu, who kept the books, as well as performing many other similar functions. Titu felt awkward, and was not sure what to do with himself or where to go. The steward, Leonte Bumbu, a rather more refined type of peasant, tall and lanky, with a strong, military-like countenance, took him round the big farmyard for a while, showing him the stables and a locked barn which had been converted into a garage for Madame Nadina's car when she came on a visit. But Titu could see that the man had work to see to, like everyone else at the old house, and thought it would be better for him to go to the village, instead of getting in the way at the manor. The next moment he changed his mind, feeling that it would not be polite to his hosts.

At lunch, however, Grigore urged Titu to consider himself absolutely free to do whatever he liked, apologizing because that day he was up to his ears in work, but adding that from tomorrow he would be entirely at Titu's disposal.

Later, as Titu was walking down the drive, he met a dark-eyed girl whose smile immediately drove away his boredom. She was slim, and bare-foot, with a pretty blue kerchief over her head.

'Hallo,' he said, stopping her, 'do you work here, then?'

'I've only been here a couple of days,' she answered. 'Auntie Profira brought me here: she's cook to the old boyar. She has been asking me to come and help her for a long time because she just can't get on with the other girls at all.'

'And what might your name be?'

'Marioara,' she replied, adding after a short pause: 'Vlad Ciungu's Irina is my mother, father died four years ago. Auntie Profira is one of my mother's sisters.'

'Well, Marioara,' said Titu graciously, 'Well, since you're such a nice girl, tell me, have you got a teacher in the village?'

'Of course we have, sir, very respectable and young too. He's a local man, and he's married. His parents are still alive and they all live together.'

'Is his house far away?'

'Oh no, not very far. When you reach the road you turn left, and then just go on until you see a house with flowers in the window and that's where he lives.'

'Well, Marioara, thank you. May I dance at your wedding very soon!' he said, gallantly pinching her cheek.

'Ah, pray God that you may!' she replied softly and blushed slightly.

This conversation improved Titu's mood a little, and he went on to the road, duly turning left. It had rained fairly heavily the previous night, but the day had brought sunshine to dry the surface of the earth. He decided that he would call on the teacher first; he himself being a teacher's son, it was the proper thing to do. The third house on the left beyond the Iuga manor was covered with galvanised iron sheets, painted red, and bore a notice between its windows announcing that it was the police station. He came to the cross-roads with the little street leading to Vaideei, where, as Grigore had shown him, the manor stood which Cosma Buruiană occupied. Right on the corner was the inn, a building with broad eaves and a gathering-place in front. The door was wide open and in it stood the inn-keeper, himself a peasant, a stout man, with his hat on the back of his head, arguing with two others. The moment he saw Titu, he greeted him respectfully. Further on, to the right, separated from the inn by a few cottages, stood the village hall, with a big courtyard; on the left was the school, and further down was the church. Titu paused in front of it, and wondered if he had missed the teacher's cottage. A child pointed to it with his finger: 'Just a bit further on.'

The house was indistinguishable from the rest, except that the yard was cleaner and, as he had been told already, in the window stood cheerful scarlet geraniums. He opened the little gate, where-upon a limping dog, hackles up, rushed at him barking furiously, as if it would tear him to pieces. From a veranda wreathed in a wild vine a sprightly peasant woman descended the steps, chasing the dog away.

'Is this where the teacher lives?' Titu asked hesitantly.

'Yes, sir, please come in. Don't worry about the dog, the wretched thing doesn't bite; he makes a lot of noise, but that's all, just to earn his keep,' she went on, seeing that the stranger continued to look at the dog from the corner of his eye. That animal, however, continued to growl hoarsely, eyeing him suspiciously.

A man, some thirty years old, with hollow cheeks, and strangely burning dark eyes, appeared on the veranda. He had a small, curling moustache, and wore a short black jacket, from under which protruded a peasant shirt embroidered with flowers.

'I am the teacher, sir!' he said.

Titu introduced himself formally and explained how he had come to Amara. They both entered the cottage, and the teacher introduced his wife, the peasant woman Titu had just met. Now, with her pleasantly awkward ways, she seemed even more attractive. Only

the peasant clothing puzzled the young man, who, with his Transylvanian outlook, expected the teacher, the representative of the intelligentsia in the village, to be dressed like a townsman, so that his external appearance as well should contribute to securing him a place of prestige among the people.

'Perhaps in your parts, the ruling class as well want the teacher to have some standing, but here . . .' and the teacher finished his sentence with a contemptuous gesture.

Florica, his wife, served Titu with the traditional little dish of *dulceață*.⁶ 'Oh, but you shouldn't have bothered!' he protested, nevertheless accepting it with much pleasure.

The woman blushed, excused herself, and disappeared once more.

After hesitating a moment, the teacher felt it incumbent upon him to tell the guest that the boyars up at the manor would not be pleased to hear of this visit, particularly old Iuga, who had forbidden him to call there since he had dared to ask for a slight improvement in the tithe agreements.

Young Herdelea was horrified, and wondered, as the teacher went on speaking, whether it had not been a mistake to come, as the man – justly or unjustly – was not welcome at the manor. However, on hearing that it was old Iuga who did not like the teacher, his fears were somewhat allayed, for Miron's behaviour towards himself had not been of the best.

The teacher went on to tell him, with some feeling, that the peasants wanted land, for they could not live on what they received from the boyars. Even if the tithe agreement drawn up was a just one, it meant that the peasant had to give up half his earnings to the landlord, whereas if he worked the same amount, but on his own land, his life would be twice as good. In fact, three-quarters of the peasants' labour went to purchase luxury for the landowners. The serfs of the old days had been much better off, for they had been fed, clothed and cared for in return for their work, whereas these peasants here, toiling even harder than the serfs, did not manage to obtain a decent meal; they had to beg and get into debt with the masters merely to save themselves from starvation.

Ion Dragoș, the teacher, spoke from his own experience, for he had led the same life as the peasants. Mere chance had made him a teacher. As he had been a diligent pupil, who loved learning, the old teacher had asked Miron to do a good deed and help the boy to obtain a scholarship. The boyar had done so, and the youth had not disgraced him, for he had proved a brilliant student and had obtained a diploma with honours. Then fate had decreed that the old teacher should die that very year, and Miron Iuga had brought Dragoș back to guide the people. Or so he had said at the time, and that was what Dragoș had expected to do. Later, however, the

boyar came to the conclusion that he had made a mistake in appointing Dragoş, and the teacher had come to feel that he was merely supposed to be a grateful servant. Finally, a short time ago, Iuga had asked the school inspector to find him a man whom he could get on with, and who would not fill the heads of the peasants with nonsense, as Dragoş did. However, the teacher said, the inspector was a man who knew him and appreciated him, and was reluctant to sacrifice him, so he hesitated to do anything about it, delayed the matter in the hope that the old boyar would soften. But Miron Iuga was not the man to change his mind, and as soon as he noticed the inspector's tardiness he would undoubtedly speak to the Minister himself, who was a personal friend, or to Deputy Gogu Ionescu, Nadina's brother, demanding that both of them be kicked out.

Neither his wife, nor the rest of the household, had any suspicion of what hung over them. He alone bore the burden of his knowledge, and waited in suspense. He lived in his parents' house, with the old people, and his brother, who had been discharged from the army last year. Of the land they had once owned, half had been given to a sister, the eldest child, who was married to a peasant. He himself had married for love, a girl who had no property. Without his salary, small though it was, they would all have starved. And there might have been a child as well; for two years now they had tried to have one.

'But is there no law which -' Titu interrupted indignantly.

'The laws are applied to us, the small and humble,' the teacher answered sadly. 'They are there just to bind us.'

The man's tone and expression clearly proved his sincerity. As he listened, Titu wondered how people could stand such a terrible state of affairs. Even if Dragoş exaggerated, like everybody who suffered a good deal, his trouble must still be serious. Herdelea decided he must speak to Grigore, who surely would see that justice was done.

'You must be patient, Mr Dragoş!' said Titu warmly. 'Justice must triumph in the end!'

'Perhaps so, but by then we shall be dead!' Dragoş answered bitterly. 'We have waited for justice for hundreds of years, sir, and it has refused to appear. Maybe it doesn't exist, maybe it's just a fairytale to comfort people who are too miserable.'

4

Ion Pravila, the mayor, made his way hurriedly into the police station. The small room in the middle was the office, in the room facing the street lived the station sergeant and his wife, and at the rear, in a slightly larger room, were the constables.

'Well, Boiangiu, I'd like to know how we'll pull ourselves out of this mess!' announced the mayor, his face distorted by anxiety.

Silvestru Boiangiu, the sergeant, having had a short after-dinner nap, had just roused himself and entered the office. He was moody and sullen; Pravila had interrupted him in the middle of a wide yawn. He would have liked to squash the mayor by asking why he had burst in upon a God-fearing man like that, in particular, because the mayor had called him 'Boiangiu', which lowered his prestige: was he not a sergeant? However, on seeing the mayor's look of horror, he too caught the infection, and, his laziness disappearing instantly, enquired: 'What's happened then?'

'A dirty business, one hell of a business!' exclaimed Pravila, looking even more depressed at the effect he had made upon Boiangiu.

The mayor was of average build, with small, sly eyes and wrinkled, leathery cheeks. He had come straight from the manor, the old boyar's voice still ringing in his ears: 'It's up to you to hunt those thieves out, you old fool, or it'll be you I'll be after!' He could never remember having seen boyar Miron in such a terrible mood, and was only too thankful when the interview had ended and he had been thrown out.

'The boyar's right, if that's so,' remarked the sergeant when he knew the facts of the case. 'And if he's right, then that's that. I've always said that the lot of them are thieves! Now you can see for yourself!'

Silvestru Boiangiu, an arrogant, moustachioed, pompous man, spoke only to calm his own nerves. If it came to the worst, the mayor could get out of it, and wash his hands of the whole affair. After all, what were the police supposed to be in the village for? Only a couple of months ago Miron Iuga had complained to his superior officer, over lunch at the manor, that the local police were weak, and their chief a bit slow, saying that was why the misdeeds of the peasants steadily increased in number. Of course, the inspector had then turned on him, calling him filthy names, and informing him that he would be slung out to the back of the Dobrogea if Mr Iuga had any reason to complain again, he knew very well what the old man was like. And now, this had to fall on his head right out of the blue.

'I'll make an investigation that these damn thieving villagers will remember into the next world!' exclaimed Boiangiu, clenching his teeth.

A long discussion followed. It was clear that the thieves must be sought in Amara, Vaideei or Lespezi. At the head of the list of suspects they placed the names of Cosma Buruiană's watchmen, and Boiangiu sent a man to bring them to the station at once. Then

they went over the characters of the most likely persons in the three villages, jotting down names, crossing them out, and reconsidering them again. In the end, Silvestru Boiangiu had compiled a list of thirty people whom he thought should be considered after he had heard what the watchmen had to say.

A constable entered with three peasants. The sergeant opened the interview by going up to each one and striking him a couple of times in the face. Then he said furiously: 'Now, out with it - who stole the lease-holder's maize?'

'Come on, let's know right away. Why be suckers for punishment, when you needn't?' added the mayor, in a paternal, wheedling tone. 'You must find the thieves for us, even if they are in the bowels of the earth, or, by God, you'll burn for it; you know who they are - unless it was you . . .'

Jacob Mitruțoiu, a slightly bent man, the eldest of the three, the marks of Boiangiu's hand still livid on his paling face, swore that he had not been on duty that night; he had been asleep at home with his children, as his neighbours and the whole village could confirm. The other two defended themselves by pointing out that they had been ordered by the boyar to watch the barns in the yard, which contained wheat; nobody had so much as mentioned the new barn. Nevertheless, they had kept an eye on it, but they heard nothing. It was true that the new barn was some little distance from the manor, in fact, the old folk had actually told the boyar that it should not have been built where it was.

These declarations were received with jeers and only brought forth a new hail of blows. It was well known that thieves always defended themselves by protesting that they knew nothing, and hadn't seen or heard anything. But a watchman, who is paid in cash to watch his master's property, must notice something when a whole wagon-load of maize disappears, just a stone's throw away. At this point, Irimie Popa, better-looking and more courageous than the other two, could not resist interrupting: 'What a wagon sir? God help us. If anything was taken, it couldn't have been more than three sacks at the most. Not even Mr Cosma says there was more, cross my heart! Maybe two or three sacks, but never a wagon-load.'

Boiangiu struck him across the mouth with the back of his hand and shouted: 'First, you steal, and then you come here with your bloody cheek! Right here in front of us; how dare you?'

The peasant's impudence had stung him to the quick.

Calling a constable who had just come from his rest period, he ordered that a genuine Rumanian thrashing should be administered to the peasants, one which they should remember till their dying day. However, he relented at this stage, and let them go on condition

that they returned next day, bringing the thieves to the village hall. Otherwise, there'd be the devil to pay.

'Well, mayor, can you explain this to me?' asked Boiangiu as soon as they were alone. 'Boyar Miron says it was a wagon-load of maize, and the lease-holder says it was only three sacks!'

'I'm sure I don't know!' answered Praviță, shrugging his shoulders.

This was a point which must be cleared up at once, for it affected the whole investigation; it was one thing to investigate the theft of a wagon-load of maize and quite another to look for a mere couple of sacks. The result of the discussion was that the mayor should go to the place where it all happened, and find out what quantity had been stolen and how.

'But don't let things slide, Uncle Tomiță!' added the sergeant, 'if you do, you'll have me on your tracks, too!'

5

Listening to the troubles of the teacher, Titu Herdelea almost felt ashamed and guilty for being there as the guest of the people's oppressors. However, when Dragoș added a few mild words about Grigore Iuga, he recovered; after all, he was there on Grigore's invitation. Nevertheless, in order to show that he stood openly on the side of the teacher, and with the down-trodden people, to whom he himself belonged, he shook hands in a brotherly fashion, before leaving, and asked Dragoș if he would accompany him to the village priest, so that Titu should meet the other father of the flock.

They passed out into the yard again as a cart entered, drawn by two miserable-looking oxen. A wizened old woman hastened to shut the gate, a boy began to unload, and an old man drew some water from the well for the animals.

'This is my whole family,' said Dragoș, indicating these three, after Titu had said farewell to Dragoș's wife.

Herdelea stepped down and shook hands with the old people and the youth, who was taller and broader than Dragoș. Before they went out into the road, the boy said to his brother: 'It would be a good idea if you dropped in at the village hall on your way; it seems the police are again beating up people for nothing – they've already had a go at lease-holder Cosma's watchmen.'

But at this Mrs Dragoș intervened, frightened: 'Ionel, don't get mixed up in it, we've got enough trouble of our own. And the boyars will say that you've been taking the side of the people again and punish you, and . . .'

'All right, all right, don't fuss!' said Dragoș masterfully, the more so when the old folk, too, started to express their agreement with his wife.

On their way, the teacher had a kind word for almost everyone he met. Titu himself was habitually friendly with the peasants at home, but it seemed to him that Dragoş was exaggerating his attitude somewhat, as if to prove what an interest he took in everyone's welfare.

A shabby-looking woman stopped them, pleading with Dragoş to tell her what she could do, and where she could start, her life was so miserable that she didn't know why she hadn't already flung herself down a well head first. At a question from the teacher she related how her own husband had been killed last winter in the forest, and how since then she had struggled alone to feed a house-full of children. It had so happened, that one of their oxen had been killed along with her husband, and she had had to sell the other for a paltry sum, for she had no money to make up the pair again. The old boyar, it was true, had called her to him at the time, and comforted her by saying he would pay for another ox and see that the orphans were cared for, but the promise was all she had received, for every time she had been to the manor she had been refused access to the great boyars, and the steward, unable to get rid of her and her tears, had told her finally that the boyar had, in fact, kept his word, and had given orders to Mr Isbăşescu to pay her for the loss. But her husband, God rest his soul, had been deep in debt, and Isbăşescu had used her money to pay a part of it, after which there were still debts left. Having no oxen it was with difficulty that she managed to get any land, and had to pay money to get her ploughing done. She had had none for this, and so she had borrowed it where she could, and therefore she had started winter with only a little maize, which could not last out even until Epiphany, because they were a big family, and had many debts, and . . .

'You must be patient, your eldest son will soon be home from the army, and then he will be the man of the house,' said Dragoş, trying to soothe her.

'God speed his coming!' cried the woman, now even more miserable. 'But I've seen others come, and they still haven't sent Petrică; only the Lord knows how much I suffer alone and how many tears I shed - I don't know what I have done that the Lord should punish me so hard!'

'He'll come!' the teacher assured her. 'You'll see him at home very soon.'

But the woman wept on, excusing herself for her continual tears, which had not stopped flowing, she said, since this poverty had fallen upon her; she had no rest, even at night.

'Her husband was a good chap,' said Dragoş to Titu, after they had parted from her. 'It is a tragedy that he died. But luckily his eldest son takes after him, if he isn't even better.'

They reached the village hall, in front of which a chaise had stopped a few minutes earlier. Platamonu, the lease-holder, was just emerging from the courtyard, accompanied by his son Aristide, a student from Bucharest; well-dressed and handsome, with regular features and fleshy, moist lips.

The lease-holder came towards Dragoş smiling very cordially, and with outstretched hand, remarking that he had come to ask the mayor something, but the moment had been a bad one, because it seemed the mayor had a serious investigation to carry out, and was running about somewhere, God knew where.

'Now if you are looking for a woman, you would do well to take him with you; he knows the women here very well!' said the teacher, half in joke, half in earnest, pointing to young Aristide, who moved up to them.

The lease-holder gave a loud, complacent laugh.

'Well, well, youth will be hot-blooded! Better he should run after women in these parts than in the cities, and get God knows what disease; although come to that you can't be sure any more even here in the country.'

They all laughed. Platamonu expressed his pleasure at meeting Titu Herdelea, remarking that he had seen him arriving with Grigore Iuga. He invited the young man to visit his place, meet his family and make a friend of Aristide, who was a nice boy. As a matter of fact, he would himself be calling at the Iuga's place some time, because he had received a letter from Madame Nadina announcing her return to Rumania and saying that she would be coming to look over the estate.

As soon as they had left the two behind, Dragoş remarked in a low voice: 'There isn't a single girl or young woman that Greek libertine doesn't chase. The father robs the men of their money, and the son robs the women of their virtue.'

There were a number of people in front of the inn, talking and gesticulating heatedly. Seeing Dragoş and Titu approaching, they lowered their voices a little. In the middle of the group stood Cosma Buruiană's watchmen, protesting that they were not guilty, and the mayor, Ion Pravilă, who kept repeating that the thieves must be found.

'Have you heard what has happened?' shouted the mayor from the midst of the crowd to Dragoş, who was reluctant to stop.

But they had to halt, for the peasants surrounded them, once again hearing the mayor's story, which the watchmen continually interrupted, encouraged by the fact that everybody took their side. As Dragoş did not seem to agree with him, Ion Pravilă sought Titu's opinion, hoping that he would approve.

'Well, I'm a stranger here, I only came yesterday,' murmured

young Herdelea, a little abashed by the curious looks he got from every side. 'I don't know anything about the circumstances or the loss, if there was one . . .'

'There was none, master!' the eldest watchman suddenly shouted. You come and see for yourself, and if . . .'

'That's enough of you, Iacob, let the gentleman speak!' the mayor interrupted him pompously.

'As I was saying, I don't know what happened or what didn't happen, but I do know that the devil is not usually as black as he is painted by frightened people.'

Some of the peasants laughed, and one added: 'That's right enough! Why should these poor fellows suffer for nothing? It's a shame!'

Taking advantage of the renewal of the discussion, now in even louder tones, Dragoş and Herdelea went on their way, turning down a little lane leading to Vaideei. Here, almost opposite lease-holder Buruiană's manor, lived the priest Nicodim Grancea, in a solid house with many outbuildings, and a garden as big as an orchard.

They found him working hard, unloading a cart full of pumpkins. He was wearing his biretta and a dirty brown cassock, tucked up in front over his knees. His long, white beard was splattered with mud. He was still agile, although he was now over seventy and had been a widower for twenty years. Only his sight was failing him, so that now he did not immediately recognise Dragoş. But upon hearing the teacher's voice he suddenly burst out animatedly: 'Oh, it's you, Ionică. I didn't recognize you. My eyesight has deserted me altogether; in church I can't see to read the gospels at all now, but I know the whole service by heart. Ah well, that's old age!'

As he spoke, he looked enquiringly at Titu. When Dragoş introduced him, the priest said mildly: 'God keep you, my son! You must excuse us that you find us like this, but that's how it is with priests in these parts; we're more simple and have less education – that's how it has been since the time of our forefathers. Now my poor son, he knows a lot, he attended the seminary in Bucharest, and became such a good priest that his fame spread as far as the Metropolitan's palace. He's got a wonderful voice, perhaps he got it from me, for I had a good voice once, even now I've something left of it – Ionică will tell you! How it grieves me that my son is not with me – only I know what I feel, my son. But there, boyar Miron doesn't want him to come . . .'

The priest's son had been sent to a parish, in fact quite a rich one, somewhere in Gorj county, because old Miron did not want him in the village, nobody knew why. This was old Nicodim's greatest sorrow and it was the continual burden of his conversation

as he offered his guests the traditional *dulceață*. Here he introduced his daughter Niculina, a woman of nearly forty, older than his son and married to a local peasant, Filip Ilioasa. While she served the *dulceață*, Niculina continually apologised for the room being in such disorder and she herself being barefoot. She had six children, the eldest was in the fifth form at the high school at Pitești. They all had to live in the priest's house until the Lord softened the boyar's heart and brought the young priest to take his father's place. Filip had his own house, left him by his father, and only lived with his father-in-law so as not to leave him alone in his last years.

'Did you hear?' said Dragoș as soon as they were in the street, after the whole family had seen them to the gate. 'Iuga's arm is everywhere, as you can see. He holds our lives in the palms of his hand and perhaps our deaths as well.'

'But surely it's a special case!' young Herdelea said. 'And of course, it's temporary – old Iuga won't live very long, and his son ...'

'Oh no, you're wrong, it isn't special,' answered the teacher, warming to his subject. 'That's how it is all over the country. Either the boyar, or the lease-holder is the master of the village; he is the law, he is everything. And just to show you that I am not prejudiced and unreasonable, let me tell you that Miron Iuga is much better than many others. He doesn't cheat anybody, and he doesn't squeeze the peasants; quite the opposite – he does good where he can and if he thinks it wise. And that's quite apart from his charity towards the church, the school, and in fact everything communal. And it is natural that he doesn't allow anybody to utter a word, for he is quite sure that only what he thinks and does is right. So, you understand, it's not a bad case, on the contrary. But you can see for yourself that we are tied hand and foot. Not because of Miron Iuga, but because of the whole situation. And this situation can't be changed by one man's disappearance. His successor, however well-intentioned, will go on, he will have to go on, in the same way. A real change will take place only when all of them disappear; when the land belongs to those who work it!'

Sensing some hidden threat in the teacher's words, Titu Herdelea said gently: 'But such changes can't take place in a day.'

'Of course not,' said Dragoș sombrely. 'Our world would shake to its foundations, and I don't want that, nor does anybody else. If only a miracle could happen!'

'A miracle,' murmured Titu. 'Only human beings can work miracles these days!'

'Yes, but real human beings, not serfs!' added the teacher with a harsh gleam in his eyes.

Very early the next day Ion Pravilă, the mayor, presented himself at the lease-holder's estate. Zamfir Chelaru, the watchman, a thin, pale fellow, hung about the new barn like a wolf slinking round a well-locked store-house. The mayor poked around, making much to-do about his investigation but, unable to find any sign of the place being broken into, suddenly barked out: 'Where did the thieves get in, by God?'

'As if we could know!' said the watchman sullenly. 'Let the boyar show you, he's just coming.'

Cosma Buruiană shivered; there had been a sharp frost that morning. He had come to be present at the investigation, for he had been told of Pravilă's impending visit by the watchmen the night before. The mayor greeted him with respectful reproaches: 'Oh Lord, what have you got me into, sir? Why didn't you just tell us about it, instead of bringing boyar Miron into it? You know how angry he gets, and how all of us have to suffer!'

The lease-holder tried to laugh the matter off, but on hearing what drastic orders the old boyar had given to the mayor, he grew anxious. What a mess he had landed in, just by uttering a thoughtless word! He could have bitten off his tongue for wagging so; the peasants would be furious with him now, and he would have no more peace on the estate. But who would have thought that old Iuga would make such a fuss about a mere trifle? He told the mayor not to be hasty, to wait a little; he would go with him to the police station and declare that he had no claim whatever, and wanted to leave everybody in peace.

Pravilă, well content, made his way back to the village. On the way, however, he realized that it would be no use if the lease-holder withdrew his complaint. Once Miron, the boyar, had given his orders, matters could not be left in the air. Old Iuga would probably become even more furious, and vent his anger upon the mayor himself. When Pravilă had gone, Cosma Buruiană began to think that he would only harm himself by taking back his complaint, and decided to keep his mouth shut.

After a night in which he had had a dream which his wife assured him meant an ill omen, Sergeant Boiangiu remained as inflexible as on the previous day. He was waiting at the village hall for Pravilă to come with the result of his investigations. Fifteen people had been sent for from Vaideci, and ten suspects from Amara were waiting interrogation in the yard. He had chosen to do all this at the council offices, because here there was a suitable room for detaining a number of arrested people, whereas at the

police station he only had a little room, which would not even have held three people.

The mayor came in red, panting, and exhausted. As he had passed the inn he had had half-a-pint of plum brandy to warm him up a bit. Despite the news that the lease-holder had recanted, Boianciu declared that he was not going to spoil his record on account of a lot of dirty, lazy peasants, and would not change his attitude. He did not concern himself with Mr Cosma's whims; he was a soldier and must do his duty. He bore such a ruthless expression that Praviță himself became frightened, as if he too were under suspicion.

Chiriță Dumitrescu, clerk to the council, was a youth who liked town clothes, which he wore with a rural pride; they included a dirty shirt without cuffs but with a celluloid collar, well-treated with an india-rubber. He had spent one year at a high-school and had become the clerk through the good offices of Mr Iuga's cook, who was his aunt. His main concern at the moment was to improve the set of his green tie, his thoughts being on the daughter of the Greek lease-holder, with whom he had been fortunate enough to get into conversation the day before, and who had smiled at him.

'Mr Chiriță, please give me a hand with these records,' called the sergeant, suddenly turning his back on the mayor. 'I'll dictate and you can write, that'll make it quicker.'

'As if I hadn't enough to do already!' protested the clerk. 'Look what's waiting for me here,' he added, nodding towards the heap of paper, his hands being occupied with the rebellious tie.

'Do it for me, Mr Chiriță. I won't be ungrateful,' persisted Boianciu, in a wheedling tone.

'Well, if you want me to so much, I'll leave everything and put myself at your disposal, Uncle Silvestru!' said the young man, enchanted at having finally managed to get his tie as he wanted it, and admiring himself in the little mirror propped against the ink-stand.

'Go on, I'm ready now!' he went on, adjusting his hair so that a lock should fall nonchalantly across his forehead.

The ten Amara peasants were brought from the yard into the smaller office under the care of a constable, who posted himself at the outer door. After a pause, Sergeant Boianciu appeared in the inner doorway, gravely measured them all up for a few seconds in silence, and then enquired: 'Well, who's the thief who stole the boyar's grain?'

'It's not us, sir!' answered several timid voices.

'So you don't want to say it while I'm polite, do you?' continued the sergeant with a sour smile. 'All right! You, what's your name, come here!'

'Me, sir? . . . Leonte Orbişor,' answered the man, entering the other office with Boiangiu.

For a couple of minutes there was only the sound of his face being struck, the soft thud of blows, and Boiangiu's heavy breathing. Then the sergeant's voice was heard: 'Who was it? . . . So you won't tell me, eh?' and the man's whining voice, heard at more and more rapid intervals: 'Don't . . . forgive me, sir! . . . I don't know, it's not me!'

The peasants in the other room looked at one another in amazement, turning their heads towards the policeman standing stiffly in the doorway, as if he were made of wood. Only after some time did Serafim Mogoş, an intelligent-looking man, greying at the temples, and father of five children, raise his voice: 'Look, you men, whoever it was did the stealing should tell us, otherwise they'll kill us all!'

But everyone swore that he was innocent. The office door reopened, and Leonte Orbişor emerged, reeling like a drunken man, his face a shapeless mass, and blood trickling down over his moustache and chin. The sergeant shoved him out, shouting: 'Constable, take him to the cell until it's his turn to have another chat with me!'

While the constable went on his errand in the yard, Boiangiu addressed the other men, in a slightly calmer voice: 'Come on, now, tell me – which of you was the thief? Tell me now, before I lose my temper. Otherwise I'll bash your hides until I've knocked the spirit out of you!'

Desperately, the peasants denied all knowledge of the theft. Boiangiu then shouted with renewed fury at Mogoş: 'You there, come on. Please step in here!'

'You can kill me, sir, my life is in your hands. But how can I say I stole if I didn't?'

The sergeant cut him short with a sharp blow on his jaw, took him by the shoulders and pushed him into the inner office, shutting the door. Smacking noises, blows, panting and raised voices were heard once more.

The investigation lasted for about two hours. In the meantime, the fifteen peasants arrived from Vaideci, escorted by two constables. They were only just in time, for the men of Amara were almost finished with. Standing in the cell, they wiped the blood from their faces and gingerly touched their jaws. The sergeant was exhausted from his labours, and, after dealing with the last Amara suspect, allowed himself a breathing space. The mayor, however, was more fortunate. He had time to go to Busuioac's inn, refreshing his courage with plum brandy. As he came and went he did not forget to bestow a parental admonition on the peasants still waiting in the yard: 'Now, lads, why don't you speak up and say who it was?'

Boiangiu did not even rest completely during his break; he

signed the records, and revised another list of possible suspects whom he thought he might examine in the afternoon.

In the yard there now gathered another group of people; some from Amara and some from Vaideei, who had come to swear on the holy cross that neither those that had been beaten, nor those waiting for their turn were guilty; that they had not left their homes on the night of the theft. There were women too, frightened and whimpering, each holding a little bundle of food for their ill-fated husbands, so that they should not suffer from hunger as well if the police happened to hold them longer.

When the interrogation was resumed and the next batch of suspects brought in, the sergeant was amazed to see that there were still some peasants in the yard. He called out from the doorway: 'What do you fellows want?'

Pantelimon Văduva, who had been called up for the army and had to present himself at the regiment in Pitești within a week, finding himself at the front of the group, quickly retorted: 'We've come to witness, sir, and say that none of them has got anything to do with the boyar's maize.'

'Oh, haven't they?' answered Boiangiu approaching him. 'Come here you, Pantelimon, you a soldier . . . and you want a rebellion, do you? . . . Christ and all archangels take you, you bastard!'

He suddenly darted forward and, taking hold of the youth's collar, struck blow after blow on his head, face and anywhere else within reach. Seeing this, the other peasants withdrew into the street, horror-struck and laughing stupidly. The manner in which the sergeant had addressed the boy and started beating him had seemed funny at first. Pantelimon, too, managing to tear himself away from Boiangiu and run after the others, had the same amazed laughter on his bruised face. Only as he wiped his face with his cuff, and as the pain persisted in his jaw, and he wondered if it was bleeding, did the smile fade from his face, and he spat blood. He had bitten his tongue in the rain of blows.

Despite his anger, Boiangiu, seeing the peasants laugh, shouted almost cheerfully: 'Stop, Pantelimon! What on earth are you running for, Pantelimon?'

He stopped laughing immediately, however; became furious once more, and returned to his duty. The suspects, gathered like a flock of sheep, heard the laughter outside and also wore smiles upon their faces, hoping to gain the sergeant's good will. He, however, thought that they were making fun of him, and in order to cut their cheerfulness short, distributed a series of blows at random, muttering indignantly: 'So, you want a rebellion, you lazy swine? It's not enough that you are thieves, you're impudent too?'

After a couple of minutes, when he had grown calmer, he drew

himself to his full height in the office doorway and shouted, pointing to a man in the crowd: 'Hey, you, come in here, you yokel, don't dawdle!'

7

On the same day, early in the morning, Grigore Iuga took Titu Herdelea over the whole estate and more particularly the new farm buildings at Ruginoasa, a new village consisting of thirty houses only, all put up by old Miron for the peasants, so they should be close at hand.

They walked the distance from Amara to Ruginoasa in only half an hour. Titu duly admired the multitude of cattle, horses, poultry, servants, tremendous granaries on tall legs, huge straw and hay-stacks and piles of maize stalks; not that he felt any special enthusiasm, but just to please Grigore, who thoroughly enjoyed it.

From Ruginoasa they descended by a cart track, nearly as far as Izvoru. On the left was the Amara estate and on the right that of Ruginoasa; the same endless plain; empty, monotonous and black under the ash-grey sky of autumn. On the horizon one could see the gold of the Amara woods and further on the left the red roof of the Ghica mansion at Izvoru.

On their way back they stopped at Ruginoasa for Grigore to make certain arrangements. Then they took another road towards Birlogu, and from there they returned to Amara on a straight path over the fields.

Young Herdelea was less interested in the villages and the estate than in the chance of having a private chat with Grigore. He had not dared or at least had not had the opportunity to ask him what he had arranged at Baloleanu's about his job with the *Universul*. Now Grigore spoke without being asked, saying among other things that Baloleanu had put in a word for him and had received a promise, but Grigore had not been satisfied, whereupon Baloleanu had pledged his word that by the time Titu returned from the country everything would be settled. He went on to say that for the time being Titu should not think of the capital or about newspapers but should feel himself at home.

Titu thanked him warmly, and told him that he had been in the village yesterday at the teacher's and at the priest's. Grigore praised the teacher for his industry and enthusiasm, adding that his father, too, respected him, although the old man considered him a bit of a demagogue, which, in a way, he actually was.

'I think he is very sincere, but just feels things a bit strongly,' Herdelea said.

'Sincerity and strong feelings make people with insufficient culture dangerous,' Iuga answered. 'That is why Dragoș no longer lives in reality, and believes himself to be the target of every persecution. Such people, unwillingly, bring about many catastrophes.'

They were at Amara by noon, and just before reaching the manor they met the teacher. He was pale and very agitated and hurried towards them. After greeting them he said in a voice choked with emotion: 'I was just going to call on Master Miron, although I knew I might be thrown out, but I had to try the impossible, to see if I could stop what's going on. Since I have had the good fortune to meet you Master Grigoriță, please listen to me . . .'

He told how the police were beating up dozens of peasants, how the women and old people had come to him and Nicodim the priest, asking them to save the peasants. Nevertheless, though his heart bled for them, he had done nothing about it, thinking that Boiangiu would slacken off, but it seemed that the investigation had only started and in the afternoon more men would undergo the same treatment.

'And all this just for a couple of sacks of maize,' concluded the teacher, trembling. 'The people have suggested that everyone should give a little maize to compensate the lease-holder for his loss. I will give some too, everyone will, only . . .'

'Shall we go to the village hall?' Grigore asked Titu, who agreed.

They started off. Outside the hall and in the courtyard groups of people, mostly women, were standing about.

Grigore received a nervous formal greeting from everyone in the office and more particularly from the mayor, who had just been discussing the afternoon's interrogations with the sergeant and the clerk. Reckoning that Master Grigoriță had come on the instructions of his father to see what progress the investigation was making, Pravilă humbly complained that since last night he had tried very hard, together with the sergeant, to get at the truth, but all in vain, nobody will confess. The sergeant, standing stiffly at attention, declared that he was determined to find the evil-doers, but that he still needed time because the peasants were many and he was interrogating them alone.

Grigore then advised him to suspend the interrogation for the time being, and not to make an unnecessary fuss in the village. The investigation, he said, should take a different course. First they should establish how much had been stolen and especially how it had been done. Thus they would be able to find out who the thieves were. The mayor then reported that he had not found any sign of a burglary and that the lease-holder had said that he had no complaint.

'If there are no traces, is it not possible, that there were no thieves?' asked Grigore simply.

'If Mr Cosma had not told me, I wouldn't have thought that anybody had been there,' said the mayor, purple in the face with emotion.

'No thief ever admits of his own free will that he had stolen anything if he is not caught red-handed,' Boiangiu added firmly.

After Grigore had left, the mayor stayed on to have a brief consultation with Boiangiu. They both respected Grigore, but feared his father. They thought it would be advisable for Praviță to go to the old man that afternoon, reporting on their efforts and telling him what Master Grigoriță had instructed them to do, so that they should be cleared of any responsibility. On being told the news Miron Iuga was startled to hear of his son's intervention. Nevertheless he gave his approval of Grigore's orders, but added that this did not mean that the investigation should cease, for, he insisted, the thieves must be found.

In the evening after dinner, old Iuga suddenly said to his son: 'There's something I want to speak to you about, which . . .'

Titu, suddenly realizing that his presence was not required, immediately rose, murmuring: 'You'll excuse me . . . I'm very tired after all the walking today.'

'Good night, then,' said Miron, with a tinge of gratitude in his voice.

As soon as Herdelea had left the room, Grigore protested to his father that he had once again been discourteous to his young friend and was showing no consideration whatever. With a summary gesture, old Iuga dismissed the matter: 'Never mind about that, it's not important. What is more to the point is that you've started to undermine my authority with the people and have prevented them from carrying out my orders. That's very serious and something you must not do, my boy! As long as my feet carry me, I'm the master here, Grigoriță. And I'm determined that it shall be so, as you very well know. Once I'm gone, you can do what you like, but until then, please . . .'

There was such authority in his father's voice that Grigore felt himself back in the days of his childhood, helpless, speechless and submitting timidly. He answered now as he had answered then: 'Yes, father.'

Only after a pause did he dare to add, still in boyish fashion: 'I thought I was acting according to your principles when I tried to stop the persecution of innocent people.'

'No,' said the old man, sharply, as if placing his seal upon an irrevocable order.

THE HUNGRY

I

Several days later, mayor Praviță sought out Grigore Iuga in secret and confessed that he could not produce the thieves because nothing had been stolen. He had carried out a detailed investigation at the barn, together with the sergeant, and they had examined more suspects, but all to no avail. In the end he had gone to Cosma Buruiană, who had admitted that he had been too hasty in making his complaint, and that he, too, now thought that nothing had been stolen, and had just been wondering if he should tell the boyar, but had been afraid Iuga would never forgive him.

'So here I've come to tell you,' said the mayor, 'because you are more forbearing. Perhaps you will be kind enough to put in a word for us with boyar Miron, and let him know why we have not carried out his orders as we are bound to do and as we would have liked.'

Grigore passed on this news to his father the same day. The old man listened calmly, betraying no surprise or irritation. Within himself, however, he was annoyed with Buruiană, more particularly because now he had to admit to his son – though he would not do it outright – that he had been in the wrong.

'It's a very good thing you have told me!' he said, simply, at the end. Then, after a pause, as if speaking to himself, he added: 'You see what sort of a man that lease-holder is . . . really . . . Well, leave it to me, I'll . . .'

He suddenly stopped, for he did not want to start a discussion, and changed the subject. As a matter of fact, it was the rumour that Nadina's estate might be sold which pierced his heart like a knife. He had not asked about it directly, for that would have been undignified, but in different places and various forms it had always been confirmed. Grigore himself admitted that some time ago Nadina had, in fact, mentioned something of the kind. He had attached no importance to it, because whenever his wife talked to him about such matters she usually just wanted to express her contempt for everything to do with the estate. Now, old Iuga took

advantage of the occasion to say lightly: 'I wonder whether the rumour about selling Babaroaga has as much truth in it?'

Grigore, surprised by the unexpected question, answered with a gesture of indifference: 'I don't know, maybe there is something in it. As far as I am concerned she can do what she likes. It's her dowry, and she can handle it whatever way she thinks best.'

'But you know very well that without your consent she can't sell anything!' Miron said, looking straight into his eyes.

'It's an understood thing that she has my consent. If she preferred to lease the land, instead of . . .'

'So, she has your consent, then?' insisted the old man, without removing his gaze.

'Naturally she has, it goes without saying, and whenever she wants to!' answered Grigore firmly, meeting his father's eyes.

'Whoever she may sell it to?' his father persisted. 'Even if it is the peasants?'

'Especially to the peasants!' said the young man, with a brief, dry smile. 'I'd rather have land-hungry peasants as neighbours, who at any rate would satisfy their hunger, and leave us in peace, than Platamonu or a landowner of that type.'

Here the old man said suddenly, as if he had long been expecting this answer, in a mild but reproachful voice, for he knew this always made more of an impression upon his son: 'I'm sorry, my boy, very sorry, to see that demagoguery has entirely ruined your power of judgment, and it appals me when I think of the future of this poor estate of ours, after I have closed my eyes. Somehow the memory of Teofil, God rest his soul, keeps coming into my mind, for I am afraid you may take after him and waste everything, and leave only dust and ashes behind.'

'You can trust me, father!' Grigore said, feeling he stood on safe ground here. 'I love the land as much as you do, you can be sure of that. But this love cannot blind me to the fact that the peasants have the right to live as well.'

At this point Miron Iuga became angry.

'So, I don't love the peasants, I don't allow them to live, is that it? I, who have divided everything that I have with them, and cared for them; I don't love them, no – it's you who loves them, stuffing their heads with promises and empty words! Really, Grigoriță, let's be serious!'

After a short silence, he continued, in a calmer voice: 'Farming needs experience – experience is the decisive thing. An estate which is broken up among peasants is doomed – that's certain and indisputable! When the two and a half thousand pogons at Babaroaga have gone over to the peasants. I'd like to know what sort of terms you'll co^oae to with them. Why, they'll laugh in your face, they'll

jeer at you, my boy! Even today they're' (here he wanted to say 'thieves', but remembered the Buruiană incident, and changed his mind) . . . 'they're as we know them; but then they would laugh at you, and eventually they may even lay hands on you. The masses need a master and a hand on the rein, otherwise you have anarchy!'

Grigore listened and made no attempt to contradict him. He had heard his father's opinions so many times, and knew that nobody could change him.

Old Miron went on to make his final points: 'So, in this case, your consent must be turned into a weapon of defence for us. You consent because the loss of the property would not have any effect upon your own, which is, after all, understandable. But in fact the danger will only really be done away with if you yourself make an effort and purchase Babaroaga.'

Young Iuga looked amused, the idea was such a strange one to him.

'If Nadina thought that I was to be the buyer,' he answered ironically, 'she might well change her mind. She wants to tear me away from the country, not to let me put down deeper roots here. Why don't you buy it, father, if you want it so much?'

For a moment old Miron was struck dumb, as if he had just heard startling news. Then he said, thoughtfully: 'That's it, Grigoriță, you're quite right. After all . . .'

2

As the weather had turned out fine, Cristea Busuioc, the innkeeper, had the idea of inviting the fiddlers round, so that the young people could dance the *hora* all the afternoon, and in the evening the old folk could enjoy themselves over a glass or two. It was the last Sunday in October, and usually by this time it was cold and damp. But today a yellow sun shone in a clear sky, beaming with summer warmth, and dispensing a nostalgic light over the weary earth.

The *hora* began on the ground in front of the inn, but soon spread out on to the road, where women and girls stood watching. Whenever a cart, or, very rarely, two carts, passed, everybody – dancers and onlookers – had to crowd back into the restricted space in front of the inn, and the squeals of frightened women drowned the flowery phrases of the fiddles.

Now the *hora* was right in the middle of the road, smoothly weaving under the delighted gaze of the womenfolk. There were only two fiddlers as the innkeeper was somewhat reluctant to pay for more, remarking that whether it was two or three who played, it amounted to the same thing if they played well and all the time,

and these two moved about even more than the dancers, now here, now there, encouraging the performers. The boots of the men stamped heavily on the drying road, but the girls leapt as lightly as gazelles, hardly seeming to touch the ground.

Old people relaxed on benches, which stood against the walls of the inn, and on a patch of free ground a group of men held council, as usual on Sundays. People had always gathered at the Amara inn from all the villages which had formerly been part of the great Iuga estate; it was a custom that had come down through generations. All brought their troubles here, from Lespezi, Vaideci and Birlogu; from Gliganu and Babaroaga, to say nothing of nearby Ruginoasa, whose people felt quite at home in Amara.

Serafim Mogoș, a man with greying temples and mild eyes, was recounting his sufferings at the hands of the police. As he spoke, he did not look at those before him, but gazed ahead as if pleading his case before a just judge. A child hung on to his arm meanwhile, twisting back and forth around him gaily, like a white butterfly dancing round a hoary old tree. Everybody knew what had happened, for the news of the investigation had spread throughout the villages. Although another three of the ill-treated men were among the crowd, they said nothing, listening to Serafim's account as if to an extraordinary tale told for the first time, or as if they somehow obtained a kind of satisfaction that wrung their hearts, from reliving those sufferings. Ignat Cercel, who was younger than Mogoș, but who with his stray mongrel look, seemed older, fixed his gaze on the speaker's lips, nodding from time to time, sighing and repeatedly interrupting with the same words: 'What can we do about it, though?'

Despite himself, his tone was so charged with a strange note of misery and resigned humiliation that those around him began to shoot him contemptuous glances. Finally Teodor Strimbu, a widower with three children, who had no land at all, burst out furiously: 'What can we do, what can we do!'

But then, horrified at his own outburst, he hastily added in a mumbling tone: 'God knows what we can do!'

Ignat Cercel had also been beaten some four years before by Boiangiu's predecessor in the police, on account of a similar theft which had been discovered at the manor. He had been knocked about so badly that he had been unable to leave his bed for two weeks, and had never completely recovered. In an effort to allay Teodor's fury, Leonte Orbișor, a lively little man with a sharp voice felt it advisable to say soothingly: 'I was one of the people who went through it with Serafim and the rest. But what else could the authorities do? There had been a theft, and after all, one shouldn't steal what belongs to someone else.'

'Fair enough, stealing's wrong,' others agreed, nodding. There was a sudden ripple of movement, as if a heavy stone had been lifted from all their hearts. It was then that Trifon Guju muttered darkly to himself, though all heard him, for he had a harsh and penetrating voice to match his angry face: 'But after all, we worked for that corn too!'

All heads turned simultaneously towards him, as if he had revealed a tremendous secret, or at the very least had laid bare a belief which lay deep in all their hearts. But no-one said a word, and even Trifon, who had a habit of repeating his words if he thought they had any weight, remained silent, and hung his head.

After a short interval, broken only by the scraping of the fiddlers and the shouts of the dancers, everyone began to speak simultaneously about something else, and in a different tone. They no longer looked at each other but, as if each was afraid of his fellow, instead watched the *hora* out in the road. Their voices mingled to make a long, interminable sigh.

The *hora* whirled away, the dancers forming a huge circle, which twisted snakily and languidly between the spectators, sometimes touching, like a caressing whip, the group of women standing on one side, and sometimes coming into contact with the men, who had collected on the ground in front of the inn. The ecstasy of the dancers burst out in their shouts and in their tiny, intricate rhythmic steps. The watchers crowded round, infected by the same delight; they all longed to melt into one single entity, without any cares or anxieties.

The merriest of them all was Pantelimon Văduva, and they were all glad to see him happy, for in a few days he had to go into the army, and God only knew when he would have the chance to be merry again. He thought this himself, too, although he had announced his ambition of becoming at least a corporal before his discharge, like Petrică, son of Petre, who would be returning home just as Pantelimon was leaving. Yet deep within him was a horror of the unknown life awaiting him as a private. He had cross-examined many men on the subject; all of them had been proud of their years of service, all said it had been fine, but a very hard life.

But his heart was heavier still because of Domnica, a plump little girl of seventeen, with ruddy cheeks, who now kept so close to him in the *hora*, clinging to his arm like a vine. At the thought of parting with her for the Lord knew how long, Pantelimon was filled with bitterness. He had wanted to marry before joining the army, as so many others had done, but their parents would not hear of it. His people would have liked him to forget Nacu's daughter by the time

he had finished with the army, and then find a more suitable young woman. On the other hand, her parents – especially her mother – were afraid that something might happen to Pantelimon in the army like what had happened to poor Florea Butuc, who had married Anghelina, Nistor Mucenicu's daughter, when he had only been eighteen, given her three children, and then died, away in the forces, and now it made your heart break to look at her. Mind you, Anghelina had been lucky to have the children, because Florea's parents had given her their son's inheritance, so that now she did have a little cottage to shelter her from bad weather, whereas Domnica might not have any, and if anything evil should befall, she would be left neither maid nor wife – just a creature for men who ran after women.

Pantelimon, whose heart moved more quickly than his reason, did not concern himself with such things. For him, all that mattered was that he was leaving, and would no longer see those hazel eyes, those yearning eyes which, it seemed to him, held all the secrets of the world; that he would not look on her small, warm mouth, full of such joyful promise. Thus he was both happy and sad, whooping and dancing with all his heart, for Domnica must see and hear him, she must remember him and remember also that there had been no other boy in the village finer than he; she must never forget him, or come to love any other. Domnica knew well that he was doing it for her sake, and her heart filled with pride. She squeezed his hand from time to time, pressed her body against his, and looked round at the others as if to tell them that she would wait for her love whatever might befall.

The most dashing young man in the village, however, was Nicolae Dragoș, the teacher's brother, a strong young man with a jet black moustache; tall, broad-shouldered, intelligent, and hard-working enough for four. All he lacked to make him the finest peasant in the village was a wife to match. As a matter of fact, the presence of Gherghina, Chirilă Păun's daughter, on his left, showed that in these matters, too, he was clever. She was an only child and bewitchingly lovely. Chirilă had several pieces of land and a house here in Amara, but a year ago he had moved to Gliganu, where he was now working for the Greek lease-holder as a steward, under contract and for good wages. He had left his Amara property in the care of his father who, although he was long past seventy, was still hale, and better than a young man at being.

Quite unselfconsciously, eyes closed and puffing out his chest like a young cockerel, a boy shouted along with the dancers:

*Green leaf of the mandrake,
How good it is to dance and play!*

The gipsy fiddler was unable to resist answering him back:

*Green leaf of the dandelion,
Life is only good and gay,
For those who are not called Ilie.*

All the dancers in the *hora*, and those who were watching as well, burst into loud laughter, including the boy himself, who was called Ilie Cîrlan. Encouraged by the approval of the crowd, the gipsy shouted to him: 'If you say any more, I can sing you something about Cîrlan, too!'

Another ripple of laughter rose skywards. And the *hora*, a chain of warm bodies, as if it had never stopped, continued to wind itself frantically into more and more convulsions, as if it would go on for ever.

In the inn, seated around a long table at the back, about a dozen leading peasants were holding a lengthy council without managing to reach any agreement, stimulating their audacity and intelligence with glasses of plum brandy served by the innkeeper Busuioc himself, for these were respectable people, and sure to pay. The innkeeper also joined in the discussion, as far as business would permit, for, after all, the subject was land, and, like any other honest man, he dreamed only of land. Only need, and the hope of scratching together enough money to buy another couple of pogons of good earth, so as to become a real man, had driven him into business. Luca Talabă, a mountain of a man, and formerly mayor, had called the council together. The peasants, however, were suspicious and timid. Each man thought that the boyars might grow angry because they wanted to buy the lady Nadina's estate and then they might not even be given land to till, and would starve. Lupu Chirițoiu, the oldest among them, with grizzled locks hanging down to his shoulders like fine hemp from a spindle, and watery blue eyes, enquired anxiously: 'Well, my friends, it all sounds fine. But supposing the boyar says from the beginning: "I can't sell you the estate because you haven't got enough money, and we must have it all in one payment?"'

Luca Talabă, who was something of a wisacre, interrupted him, his young-looking face glowing with eagerness: 'Hey, father Lupu, steady on! If we talk like that we'll never be able to buy the land in our lifetime, we'll never have enough money to pay the boyars when they want us to. You're an old man, you ought to know; the one who sells makes the concessions and adjustments, he doesn't try to strangle you like you say, father!'

At this moment the innkeeper came up to the table with half-a-pint for Matei Dulmanu, a quiet, sober man from Lespezi, and added: 'If it comes to it, we could borrow from the bank, too. The boyars there will help, if we ask them politely, and if they hear we

want to buy an estate, because the money is safe, they could get it back on the property at any time if they wanted to.'

'He's right,' went on Luca more confidently. 'We'll get the money from the bank. We'll have to work, but still, we'll be working for ourselves. For the time being, let's each put together what we have and then we'll see what it comes to; us here and as many others who want to. We'll put it down as a token of our good faith, and then, we'll have to get the rest together for very shame.'

Marin Stan, a wizened, dried-up individual, with sharp, bird-like features, overcome by the amount of brandies he had drunk, suddenly yelled furiously from his corner of the table: 'Once we've got the land in our hands, not even God can take it away from us.'

Other voices took him up at once: 'No, no, we'll never give it back again once we've got it!'

Christea Busuioc, the innkeeper, intervened once more, glancing contemptuously at Marin: 'You think the boyar is so ignorant that he'd hand over the land before the money was certain, so that you could cheat him, and say "We haven't got the money, but we shan't give back the estate, even though we haven't paid for it, because it's ours anyway." Believe me, Marin, you'll drink a lot more brandy before you deceive boyar Miron like that!'

'No man with any brains would think of getting the land for nothing,' retorted Luca crossly. 'Only Marin here could think of that; it's the brandy talking.'

All nodded in agreement. Marin Stan looked at each man confusedly, apparently unable to understand why they were all cross with him, when he was only expressing what everybody felt.

Lupu Chirițoiu, who had been turning over things in his mind before speaking, as was his way, now said to Luca reproachfully: 'Look here, man, I thought you had more sense; can't you see that we're just talking, arguing and sickering, and we don't even know if the estate can be bought?'

Almost angrily, Luca Talabă said: 'That's how it would seem, only I knew it's on sale, father, because I got it from Chirilă Păun, who's the right hand of the Greek at Gliganu. You see, father? And the Greek told Chirilă, as I tell you now, that next year, with God's help, the agreements will be different from what they are. The Greek said to Chirilă "I shall buy the lady Nadina's estate on my own!" that's what the Greek said. Father Lupu, you must remember, for you were a grown man then, didn't the same thing happen when boyar Miron's brother sold his land?'

'Many rumours did fly around then, too,' the old man admitted. 'One can't remember them all. But you know very well, my friends, that the boyars don't want to sell land to the peasants, for if we peasants have land, too, then who will work on the estate?'

A depressed silence followed old Lupu's words. From outside came the beat of the dancers stamping, the sound of the fiddles, and young Pantelimon Văduva's shouts. After some moments, the innkeeper's voice was heard from behind the bar, berating his Sunday help, a big, stupid youth.

'You there, d'you hear me? A pint for Serafim Mogoş, understand? Here, take it, and the devil take you, you fat lump.'

His harsh voice drove away in the confusion of the peasants, and Luca, as if he had regained his voice, spoke in louder tones: 'That's how it's always been, and that is why we haven't been able to get rid of our poverty. It was because we were afraid, afraid of doing the wrong thing. We didn't want to offend the boyars, so we let others snatch the land away from under our noses. Don't you worry, father, as long as the boyars have estates they will always find men to work their land, because there are always more and more people, but the land doesn't stretch – it's not like a jelly.'

'Why is there so much talk?' shouted Vasile Zidaru suddenly. He had held his peace up till now, because otherwise he would have said too much, and the others would have shut him up. Now his feelings burst out in a voice which rose above all the rest. 'Let's go and see the old boyar right away, ask him politely, and get hold of the estate.'

Matei Dulmanu finished his drink, wiped his brown moustache with the back of his hand, and added conclusively: 'After all, he is our father, he would never abandon us . . .'

Luca Talabă had wanted to make this proposal himself, and had called them together for this very purpose. To hear his own idea uttered by someone else gave him quite a turn. He felt like an ancient old horse who has braced himself to give the cart a great tug, and very nearly has come a cropper, for it is empty. He scratched the back of his head, and said: 'Just a minute, friends; you can't go to the boyar like you'd go to the mill. You must know exactly what you want, because he'll ask you questions and cross-examine you. If we just stand there like idiots, he'll get angry, and then it'll have been a waste of breath, and things will be worse than before.'

The effect of this remark was to create fresh confusion, which Luca himself was unable to dispel. Fear and timidity flooded their souls, swamping their longing for land. The meeting collapsed like an old glove. Luca tried in vain to repair the damage, by saying: 'Well, let's see, friends; let's come to a decision.'

Everyone said something, but none of their words had any meaning. Only Marin Stan kept his courage intact, and hoarsely shouted, again and again, as if for his own benefit alone: 'The land belongs to us, because we till it, all of it!'

The innkeeper, seeing that things had got into a mess, did his

duty behind the bar, hectoring his assistant more forcefully. At a table near the door an innocent-looking young policeman was having a drink with Anton Nacu and talking in careful, precise tones, somewhat enviously watching the young people in the *hora* outside. Busuioc, who was a prudent man, kept his eye on them, fearing lest the constable, under the pretext of watching the *hora*, should be listening to the peasants, and might pass on information to the manor; then the innkeeper too, would be in trouble with the boyars. Marin's furious outburst prompted him to go over to the policeman and ask him smilingly if he wouldn't like to join in the *hora*. The young man blushed, in his heart he wanted to do so, but fear of calling down upon himself the wrath of his superior officer held him back, and he answered, with a sigh, that he didn't feel like dancing, but would instead, accept another nip. Having reassured himself, Busuioc went over to the big table, and said: 'It seems to me you've been talking for nothing. And Marin there has no more brains than a chicken, and is moaning away without stopping to realize that a hard-working man doesn't whimper like a woman, but gets down to doing something.'

Then Marin Stan interrupted furiously: 'Christ! It's all very well for you to abuse others; you've got land, your business runs along smoothly and you stand all right with the boyar! You don't bloody-well care!'

'Huh! I don't care? We'll see about that!' Now the innkeeper became angry. 'D'you think I enjoy running about for the likes of you till the brandy fuddles your brains, instead of getting others to serve me? You're just a good-for-nothing drunk, Marin, and I wonder these people allow you to disgrace them!'

'Do I drink out of your money?'

'If I gave you a chance you would, but . . .'

'Oh, pack it in, for God's sake. We've had enough of your bloody wrangling!' called out Luca Talabă, rising suddenly. 'Let's go to the manor, and see what comes of it!'

They all rose, as if his forcefulness had done away with their hesitation. The innkeeper, looking round, made sure everybody had paid, and then said, quietly: 'May God go with you! Look after Marinică, so that he doesn't disgrace you - he's taken a little more than he can carry!' Marin Stan laughed, and his anger passed away.

'Look, there's Uncle Petrică!' a child shouted. A woman heard, turned her head, saw him too, and repeated: 'Petrică's here!'

He was coming down the uneven little street, where the puddles had all dried in the wind. His hat was on the back of his head, and

he carried his army-box on his shoulders. His swarthy face seemed even darker, but great joy shone in his eyes.

One by one, all heads turned towards Petre Petre, who approached smilingly. Pantelimon Văduva left the *hora* and ran to meet him, followed by other boys. The dance broke up, and everyone crowded round the newcomer, enquiring, exclaiming and expressing their amazement. The fiddlers went on playing for a while, just to show goodwill, and then joined the crowd.

Petre could hardly cope with all the questions. He was greatly loved by them all, for he was pleasant, quiet and helpful. Pantelimon took his box from him, to carry it to his home. He fought to keep his place near Petre, and repeated until he was heard: 'You've just come back, but I've got to go soon.'

'Don't worry, the Lord'll look after you as well,' said Petre, warmly looking straight into his eyes.

Exchanging greetings with one and the other, he finally reached the space in front of the inn, where the men stood. He was asked about the latest news from town, and Busuioc himself, who liked to know everything, left the bar and came to find out what was being said. Ignat Cercel, observing that Petre only spoke about the army, enquired in a whining voice: 'But what about the boyars in Bucharest? What do they think about us miserable wretches?'

'You can get along all right with the boyars so long as you keep your place and you're obedient,' Petre answered.

This answer did not satisfy Ignat, although he nodded as if approving.

'A man puts up with as much as he can; otherwise he would go mad,' remarked Serafim Mogoş bitterly.

Ignat approached more closely and said in a confidential tone: 'What about the land, Petrică? Didn't you hear anything about it? They say here that the king wants to divide the land between the people, but that the boyars won't let him.'

'That's what Marin Vilcu of Izvoru said too. He got it from his son, who's gone away to study in Alexandria - he's going to be a priest!' added Leonte Orbişor preening himself as if his confirmation had been decisive.

Almost angrily, Toader Strimbu remarked: 'People keep saying all sorts of things, but nothing ever comes of it. I had some business in the Court of Piteşti a few days ago, everyone there said that by the spring we should all have land, because the king had ordered it. They even lost their temper and swore at me when I would not believe it.'

Petre, stirred by the longing in the eyes of the crowd around him, murmured: 'It may well be. There are lots of rumours in Bucharest, some say this and some say that. Not even the boyars know how to

deal with it so that everyone will be satisfied. And so they hold council after council, and if they don't come to a decision . . .'

'Eh, it's not easy to give when one has been too richly blessed by the Lord!' Ignat muttered.

'If only the king would command it, then everybody could take what they wanted, whether the boyars liked it or not!' Toader Strimbu said, with a gleam in his eyes.

Busuioc, the innkeeper, commented mockingly: 'Oh yes, if the king would listen to you, everything would be all right. But the pity is that the king lives with the boyars, and he won't quarrel with them for your sake, Toaderică!'

Some laughter followed this, but Leonte Orbișor said: 'If only our voices could reach the king's ears!'

At this moment, Petre's mother elbowed her way through the crowd surrounding him, crying: 'Petrică, Petrică, my darling, my boy! The good God has sent you back to me just when my life was hardest! Bless the Lord and the holy Mother of Jesus for sending you home . . .'

She flung her arms around him and kissed him, weeping and murmuring. The young man held her to him with his arm and said gently: 'Quiet, mother, quiet. Don't cry.'

Smaranda was a woman who had faded early. She wiped away her tears with a corner of her kerchief, smiled happily for a moment. But as soon as she opened her mouth to ask him how he had come, she burst into tears once more, at the thought that he might have had to walk all the way, or that he might be hungry. Soothingly, her son reassured her by explaining that he was not at all tired, because when he had left the train at Burdea, he had had the good fortune to meet Ștefan Oanță, who had taken him in his cart as far as Lespezi, so that he had travelled like a real boyar.

'But let's get along home, mother. I've spent enough time with these people,' he went on, saying good-bye all round.

Pantelimon walked back with Petre, carrying his box. His home was on the edge of the village, beyond the manor, towards Ruginoasa. As soon as they were well away from the *hora*, Petre asked: 'But where's Marioara, mother? I didn't see her among the girls.'

While Smaranda was explaining to her son that Marioara had gone up to the manor to work with Profira, her aunt, and that the girl had pretty good wages and not too much work, Pantelimon suddenly remembered that in going with Petre he had deserted Domnica. The sound of the violin recommenced behind them; a sign that the *hora* had started up again.

On a bench near the gate opening into the police-station yard, Boiangiu sat talking to Constantin Bîrzotescu, the tax-collector. a

tall, thin, clean-shaven fellow. Petre removed his hat and gave the police officer a military greeting.

'So here you are!' responded Boiangiu in a friendly tone. Petre approached respectfully, and told him that the captain had let him go a couple of days early, because of his good conduct throughout his service. Boiangiu asked him a few more questions, and sighed after the life in Bucharest, where he too had known what it was to have a good time once or twice. But that had been before he got married. He then shouted at Pantelimon: 'See, that's how you should behave, too, instead of going around talking a lot of rebellious nonsense!'

He wagged his finger warningly, laughing, and then shook hands with Petre, saying: 'Welcome home!'

3

'Well, what's the matter?' Miron Iuga asked the peasants, who, with bared heads, greeted him with a respectful 'Kiss your hand, sir!'

For a moment, the men only looked at each other encouragingly. Then Luca Talabă said loudly to Lupu Chirițoiu: 'You start, father Lupu; you're older and better at this sort of thing.'

'But keep it short, old man, because it's chilly, and I'm only wearing light clothing,' Miron said impatiently, interrupting old Lupu, who had started on a long story.

Encouraged by Miron Iuga's words, Luca interrupted impetuously: 'That's right, sir! A lot of talk is poverty. We want to buy the lady's estate, and work it, every one to have a share. And we came to you to ask you to help. If you will only help us, and take pity on us . . .'

'You're a father to us, after all!' put in Matei Dulmanu quietly, as if sure that by saying this he would win the boyar over completely.

'We can't go on living as we do, sir! Our misery is too much to bear,' added Vasile Zidaru, so mildly and gently that he hardly recognized his own voice.

There were twelve of them altogether; and each one thought himself obliged to throw a word or at least a sigh into the scales.

Miron Iuga gazed at them in amazement, as if he were seeing them for the first time; as if the words he heard were strange and unintelligible. There was a considerable pause before he asked, blinking quickly: 'Which estate?' Then he suddenly remembered, and added quickly, 'Oh yes, I know . . . I understand.'

But even as he spoke, pain welled up within him. That these peasants, who had themselves lived on the Iuga estate for genera-

tions, should now dare to offer to buy up its remnants, deeply wounded his pride. If he had acted as his heart prompted, he would have ordered his servants to hand them over to the police to beat the nonsense out of them. But he controlled himself and said calmly: 'It is useless coming to me; I've no estates to sell.'

The peasants were bewildered. Marin Stan alone raised his voice: 'But the lady wouldn't do anything without your consent, sir!' Luca Talabă regained his courage: 'We think of you as our master, sir, and hope you will be merciful to us.'

Miron Iuga laughed contemptuously. 'Oh, no doubt. But this time it would be better for you to speak to the lady Nadina herself; I don't even know that she wants to sell the estate, if you want to know. I hear it from you for the first time!'

The peasants thought he was joking, and smiled. The boyar went on: 'As a matter of fact, she's due to arrive any moment. We received a telegram from her last night that she was coming today by car. We are waiting for her now.'

Lupu Chirițoiu muttered sadly: 'I don't think you really want to sell it to us, sir; that's why you send us to the lady, who doesn't even know us. We don't know her, either. I told the men it would be like this before we came, but they wouldn't believe me! Now they'll have to get it into their thick heads.'

Iuga winced, for the old man had read his very soul. He said roughly: 'For all your grey hair, Lupu, you've the brains of a sparrow! D'you think I can sell an estate which isn't mine?'

Luca rushed in to heal the breach, saying submissively: 'Don't get angry with us, master, you must pardon us, because we're stupid, and don't know how these things are arranged. We'll go to the lady, as you say, when the Lord has brought her, and we shall keep on, and ask her, because it wouldn't be fair if someone else took the land away, because we and our fathers before us have always worked on it! Life is so terribly hard for us, I don't know how we manage, having so little land as we do.'

'It's always too little!' remarked Miron dully, and added, after a pause: 'But it seems you've managed up to now!'

'We've always suffered, master!' cried Marin Stan, 'and we've sunk deeper and deeper into misery because we haven't got any land!'

'Land, land,' muttered Iuga. 'In the old days the peasants didn't seek what belonged to the landowner, and they lived better.'

'Times were different then, master!' said Vasile Zidaru.

'We were serfs, then, boyar!' cried Marin Stan again. 'Make us your serfs again, maybe it would be better for us!'

'The truth is that you've just got into the habit of begging!' burst out Iuga, now becoming irritated by their persistence.

'We just keep on asking and asking, because that's the only thing

we can do!' submitted Lupu Chirițoiu humbly. 'It's only by asking that we hope to get any mercy.'

Becoming aware of the hungry look in each pair of eyes, now lowered from old habit, old Iuga felt for the first time that these people, whom he had always considered loyal, were in fact his enemies in their hearts. He regretted having seen them at all, but in particular having allowed them to prolong the discussion. He realized, however, that matters could not be mended by brutality. He merely murmured wearily: 'Well you can shut your mouths now, there's been enough prattling. You've lost all sense of propriety and decency.'

He looked deliberately and coldly at each in turn, and in each face he read the same yearning. Their dogged expressions burnt into his soul. A man's voice suddenly broke roughly into the uneasy silence: 'Whoa, you brute, you, may the devil take you!'

It was one of the servants watering the cows in the manor yard. Flocks of poultry busily scratched and pecked around, and a hen started clucking noisily.

'And that's how matters stand,' said Miron, quietly, as if the servant's curses had broken through his depression. 'You'll have to speak to the lady yourselves, if you've no objection, as she owns the estate. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of buying it myself.'

'Oh Lord, then it's useless for us to try!' exclaimed Luca Talabă in horror.

'Why?' enquired the boyar. 'It's fair competition. You want land and I want land. But it would be more just if I purchased it, because after all it was ours before, part of the body of my land. You ought to remember, Lupu, because when you were a lad you worked for us, when my father was alive. That's how it should be, it's fair for the boyar to buy up land which belongs to peasants, but not for peasants to buy from the boyar.'

Some of them tried to take up this point, but Miron Iuga now lost his temper: 'That's enough now. Be off with you, I've finished with you. You've lost all sense of what's right and proper.'

Once again the peasants muttered respectful phrases, and turned towards the entrance. As they departed, Lupu Chirițoiu said, loud enough for the old man to hear: 'The boyar's right; from Izvoru to Serbănești there was an estate. I remember very well when . . .'

Simultaneously, however, Matei Duhananu burst out, choking with rage: 'He'll never have enough, may hell consume him!'

Miron Iuga stood where he was, like a post. He gazed after them, oblivious both to the clucking of the hens and the bellowing of a cow for its calf. Only one thought incessantly ran through his mind: 'Land, land, and again land; that's all the wretches can think of!'

As he turned, he saw Grigore and Titu Herdelea coming through

the entrance. They had been walking in the fields; enjoying the fine weather.

'What are you doing here, father?' enquired Grigore. 'Has Nadina arrived?'

'No, she hasn't, but some people have come after her estate!' the old man answered.

'What was that?' asked his son in surprise. 'Tell me, who were they?'

Miron Iuga looked at him for a moment in silence, and then, turning away his head, answered: 'The peasants.'

4

'Get down, you little bastard, or you'll ruin my gate; go to the devil!' mother Ioana yelled, in her usual bad-tempered voice, at Vasile Zidaru's small boy, who clung to the bars of the gate, swinging himself to and fro and shouting at the top of his voice.

Ioana was feeding the piglet at the back of her yard, which ran into the orchard. She held the swill bucket under the animal's nose, urging it meanwhile: 'There's a good laddie, come on, eat it up!' The piglet, however, removed his snout from the full bucket and went over to the empty one, licking it. This made the old woman cross: 'You stupid pig. Come on, stuff until you burst, may the dogs swallow you up!' As the animal sank its head up to the eyes into the swill again, her dog, a great white beast with large black patches, slunk up to the empty bucket and daringly looked in to see if anything was left for him. 'The devil take you, don't stick your nose in there!' The dog obediently retired, wagging his tail hopefully, and gazing enviously at the piglet and his mistress, while keeping his eye on the other dog, a mongrel puppy some six months old, who leapt about behind the old woman, barking now and then, like a playful child.

Seeing that the piglet was only playing about with the food, mother Ioana took the bucket away, muttering: 'You've had enough and now you're only messing it about, you stupid bastard, keeping me bent up here till my legs hurt!' The piglet grunted, satisfied, and started snuffling around the ground in the hope of finding a tastier morsel. Failing in this, he attempted to follow his mistress, but being tethered, was pulled up short. The dogs went after her as far as the porch, where she set down the buckets near the door, remarking: 'There you are, may the devil take you!' The big dog rushed to the empty bucket but, realizing that he had made a mistake, curled his lip at the puppy, biting him in the neck and rolling him on the ground for a few moments, just to teach him good

manners, and then set to at the food, completely ignoring the whining of his younger companion, as well as his mistress, who grumbled: 'You're always squabbling, aren't you, you little devils!'

Vasile's boy was still swinging on the gate, as if the old woman had never scolded him at all.

'Didn't you hear me, you young demon? You'll pull off my hinges!' she screamed in a fury. 'Why don't you go home and leave me in peace; you and that other little wretch have made my life a misery all the summer. Haven't you got any parents to keep you off the streets and out of other people's gardens?'

The child would still not have been frightened by her words, but another voice intervened: 'Nicu, dear, come in; do you hear me? Why do you stay there and let her swear at you?'

Vasile Zidaru lived across the road. He had a wife like a grenadier guardsman, with a sharp tongue nobody could match. The child, a fair, plump little thing, feared her alone; everyone else at home only spoilt him and ignored his mischief. Zidaru had three daughters and a son, and only after the girls had married had the son been born; his wife had felt ashamed, it was surely a punishment by the Lord to make her bear a child at her age, and give her all the bother of bringing it up.

As Nicu got down from the gate and crossed the road, mother Ioana took two buckets from the house and went to the well, which was a little distance away, at the edge of the road, near the police station. The dogs bounded around her as she went, sniffing at all the gates and in the ditch, as if they had lost something. Little Nicu, although he had only just entered his own yard, could not settle down. He snatched up his whip and dashed after the old woman, but then, remembering that his family had dogs, too, went back. They had a white bitch, who had limped since the police had shot at her one night, and was very fierce, so that she was tied up during the day to keep her away from passers-by. Before he could untie the string, old mother Ioana came back with her full buckets. Following her into her yard, the child asked: 'Can me and my dog play with your dogs? Will you let us? Will you?' The old woman did not answer. The child was accustomed to coming over to her place, because until a few days ago her nephew, Costică, had been staying with her. He was also about five, as dark as a little gipsy, and a very imp of mischief. Left alone now, Nicu amused himself with the dogs, the hens and the cats. Old Ioana scolded him, telling him to go away, but her bark was worse than her bite; she loved children, and the feel of human beings around her house, for that was what she had been used to all her life.

She had moved into this cottage a year ago. It stood alongside the manor. In the next street, beyond Cosma Buruiană, the lease-

holder's manor, she had another house, a fine, big one. It was there that she had lived throughout her married life with Ioniță Crăciun, whom the Lord had called some ten years ago. But she had not feared her widowhood, for she had looked after everything even when her husband was alive. He had been fond of the bottle, and in order to enjoy himself in peace, had always obtained work away from home. He had been the mayor, he had been a caretaker, and had had a host of other jobs, and in that way he had always had money to spend at the inn. Ioana had brought up the children and settled them satisfactorily. Her son had become a recorder in the court at Bucharest, two of her daughters had married priests, and the youngest, Florica, was wife to Pavel Tunsu, in the village. She had thought that Florica and Pavel would be her stay in her old age, and had taken them into her own house to live with her. Her own son kept writing that she could come to Bucharest to stay with him, so that she should have no more worries, and could have a rest. But she could not bring herself to leave her native district, where she had spent all her life. Though she was now sixty, she still felt strong; only her back had become slightly bent. She ate well; a bottle of plum brandy always stood by her plate, and she had her own pig, poultry and maize. She was plump, and vigorous, unlike the other women of her age.

After suffering seven years of misery swallowing her pride with Florica, she had realized that they would never get on, and had decided to leave her daughter to be judged by the Lord and to find a new home for herself. Rather suffer poverty than this eternal rowing, quarrelling and misery. Fortunately, she had not divided everything among the children, but had kept several pieces of land for herself; to be on the safe side and provide for such an eventuality. So she and her daughter had parted last year of their own free will, and without any bad feeling; her son-in-law had been more helpful than her daughter. As she owned this piece of ground near the road, next to the manor, she had built herself a cottage from a maize-barn transported there on wheels by twelve oxen. She herself had plastered it with clay outside and whitewashed it inside. A man had been good enough to repair the roof for her, making a hearth with some sort of chimney, a hen-house and a pig-sty. One of her neighbours had presented her with a pair of small window-frames which he did not need any more. It is true that she only had three panes of glass for them, but she had patched up the remaining space with paper obtained from the priest. All this had aroused Florica's anger, because her mother had made her the talk of the village. But Ioana had simply answered, a little bitterly: 'Well, my dear, I think I've put up with you quite long enough!'

After a while, however, Florica had made it up, and when spring

had come, she had sent her eldest son, Costică, to keep his granny company for a while. At the same time, she had one mouth less to feed. The child had plagued old Ioana throughout the summer and autumn, and a couple of days ago had turned the whole cottage upside down, bringing in a crowd of other little demons. Nevertheless, she had put up with him, just to show that they needed her, instead of her needing them.

In fact, she never had been talkative, tending rather to be morose when she was truly angry, and her heart was as soft as butter. It was her way to talk to herself, or to the animals, which obeyed her, and understood her better than human beings. She merely anticipated any disagreement by consigning her opponent to the devil, modifying her tone to fit the circumstances.

'Look, granny Ioana, your big dog won't leave the cock alone!' complained Nicu suddenly. He wanted to tie her dog to the string of his limping bitch so that he could play horses with them.

'Leave the cock in peace, you great brute!' said Ioana without looking. She was considering what to give the hens to eat, for evening was approaching and they had started to gather round the house from the various scratching places where they had spent the day.

A little later she sat herself on the doorstep with the big plate in her lap, calling as she did every evening: 'Come on, now, chickabiddy . . . chick, chick . . . chickabiddy . . .'

The hens and chickens ran from all directions like obedient children, crowding and pushing each other round her feet. She counted them and found that two old hens and the cock were missing. Emptying the plate, she shooed the dogs away so that they should not eat the hens' food, and went towards the road, calling persistently: 'Chick, chick, chick, chickabiddy . . .'

As she opened her gate, she heard the loud, threatening sound of a motor horn. On the other side of the road she saw the hens, enjoying a dust bath, with the cock near them, and called anxiously: 'Chick, chick, chick, chickabiddy . . .'

A car was coming at great speed, but the hens did not seem perturbed. Suddenly concerned lest they should be run over, mother Ioana rushed across the road to protect them. But she only managed to reach the middle. The driver turned the wheel violently and the motor skidded and shot past her at lightning speed, almost swerving into the ditch to avoid her. A sound of women screaming came from the machine and across the road was heard the voice of Zidaru's wife: 'Where are you, Nicu - you'll get killed!'

Mother Ioana stood petrified. The two hens dashed around clucking frantically, but the cock which had stood guard over them

was now a heap of bloody feathers. The old woman picked it up by a wing-tip and dragged his carcass home, muttering in smothered tones: 'May the devil take you!'

5

The car drew up suddenly with a dashing swerve at the foot of the steps, where Grigore, who had heard the engine and the sound of the horn as it approached, was waiting with Titu Herdelea. The chauffeur cut off the motor, leaped down, and hastened to open the doors, so that the boyars, muffled up in furs, rugs, head-scarves and goggles, like Polar explorers, could get out.

The first to unwrap himself and make contact with the earth was Gogu Ionescu, who had been sitting next to the chauffeur. He was irritated and bad-tempered because of all the incidents on the journey. Shaking hands with Grigore, he declared in disgust: 'Glad to see you old chap, but let me tell you this is the last time they'll ever use me for such experiments; I've had a bellyful!'

'Whatever's the matter, Gogu; why on earth are you in such a state?' young Iuga enquired, understanding nothing.

'If your wife wants to indulge in such thrills, she must look elsewhere for her victims!' went on Ionescu, tearing off his goggles.

'Oh, Gogu, you're ridiculous!' cried a merry female voice. 'Afraid to travel by car! You should be ashamed!'

Everybody laughed except Gogu, who lost his temper.

'Well, I haven't got the right sort of temperament for these adventures, and really I don't feel inclined to break my neck on the high roads just for the sake of the motoring fraternity!'

His anger livened up the others, who in the meantime had divested themselves of their scarves and goggles. Just for a second the three of them did not move, but sat as they had travelled: Nadina on the right, Eugenia on the left, and between them Raul Brumar. Then Nadina rose, saying: 'Joke or no joke, the incident with the old lady on the road was almost a catastrophe! If Rudolf had lost his head, either she would have been under the wheels or we would have been in the ditch! Well done, Rudolf!'

The chauffeur smiled his acknowledgement and Nadina threw herself into her husband's arms, talking in a studiously affectionate tone: 'Oh, Grig, darling, how I've longed for you!'

Grigore kissed her on the cheek, disturbed by her words, but more particularly by the way she uttered them. Only then did he notice Brumar. At the same time, his look fell, behind the car, on the scarlet bed of flowers; the blossoming heart which he had laid, with such devotion, in front of Nadina's nest. He shook hands with

Brumaru mumbling vaguely: 'Oh, it's you . . . I didn't recognize you in that disguise!'

Nadina quickly intervened with an explanation: 'I just brought him along to make a bigger party. You don't mind, do you?'

'Oh no, on the con . . .'

He had wanted to say 'on the contrary', but changed his mind and broke off. Going behind the car and kissing Eugenia's hand, he helped her to descend. Several servants fussed with the luggage, not knowing what to do. Nadina, seeing this, said to the chauffeur: 'Rudolf, will you see that Mistress Jenny's luggage is all put together?'

Titu Herdelea stood on one side, much embarrassed because nobody paid any attention to him. Grigore suddenly observed this, and tried to make amends: 'Excuse me, I quite forgot him, bless him. Let me introduce my friend and guest, Titu Herdelea.'

The young man bowed, smiling shyly. Nadina examined him for a second, and then extended her hand. Titu did not look at her properly, but he did notice that she was extremely beautiful.

Eugenia smiled at him very sweetly and said: 'What a surprise!'

'As a matter of fact, you should know each other; you have met before,' remarked Grigore to Gogu, seeing that the latter looked at Titu as if he were a stranger. 'He is Jenny's brother-in-law and writes verses!'

'Why yes, of course!' exclaimed Gogu, approaching young Herdelea. 'That's right. How are you?'

In fact, he still did not remember him, but preferred not to show it. He did not want people to think that he had a bad memory, for that would have indicated the approach of old age. Titu observed his confusion, and felt a pang, remembering how Gogu Ionescu had invited him last summer to stay with them, and to write poems all day long. They exchanged a few words, and then Gogu resumed his conversation with Grigore: 'I'm afraid we can't come in, my dear fellow! We're going straight on to Lespezi, because I've given orders for the fires to be lit and a meal to be prepared. Oh my God - to think we have to get into this car again!'

Young Iuga protested; they must certainly stay and have a rest first, to say nothing of his father, who would have been very upset if they didn't.

'The car must have shaken you up very much, to make you so discourteous!' mocked Nadina, adding simply: 'Well, come on in, Jenny dear; please Raul, come in!'

In the big hall the lamps were lit, it was pleasantly warm, and the customary dishes of *dulceață* were waiting. Very soon old Iuga appeared and embraced Nadina affectionately: 'Well, we've managed to get hold of you at last, you pretty, naughty little thing!'

Flattered, she kissed him charmingly, murmuring: 'Was there ever a nicer, more adorable daddy?'

Gogu took advantage of the new arrival to complain once more about the events of the journey. They had had three punctures and the engine had broken down twice. They had slaughtered innumerable geese, ducks, hens and one piglet; almost run over God knew how many people, and narrowly avoided collision with a host of carts and wagons: that was what Nadina called having a good time. But Grigore must be held responsible, for he had permitted her to purchase the machine. Why, in the whole country there were only two or three dozen lunatics who had bought themselves such perilous contraptions. And what a waste, first of all to pay out for the car itself, and then to award the wages of a university professor to a wretched German just to drive the machine, instead of travelling respectably by train, like a sober human being.

'*Mais voyons, Gogu, si c'est sérieux tu es plus que ridicule!*' exclaimed Nadina. 'Surely I can have my little pleasures, just as you have yours! Soon, even the barbers will have their own cars standing in front of their shops, and I shan't be interested in it any more. But at the moment riding in an elegant, powerful Benz really gives one a thrill!'

'While expressing my thanks, I hereby relinquish all such thrills!' cried Gogu, his hand raised towards the ceiling, and provoking shrieks of laughter.

After a short while, he and Eugenia said goodbye. Eugenia invited Titu to visit them, although, she said, they were not so comfortable at Lespezi: 'But it would really be a pleasure to see you,' she added, smiling kindly. 'And don't postpone it too long, because we usually don't stay more than a few days.'

'Perhaps I can come tomorrow?' murmured Titu happily.

'That'll be all right, won't it, Gogu?' Eugenia asked her husband.

'Oh certainly, my dear!' he answered. 'Your word is my law!'

After they had left, Nadina described events from her long holiday, addressing herself more particularly to old Iuga. Suddenly she broke off and said to Grigore: 'Darling, could you see about Raul's room? You don't mind, sweetheart, do you? He's a stranger here.'

Young Iuga went out with Brumaru, and Titu followed them, not wishing to be superfluous. He had taken a proper look at Nadina, and still thought she was beautiful, but there was something about her beauty that startled him and made him shiver.

Miron Iuga stayed behind with Nadina. The two of them were alone, now, and he cast her such a long, searching glance that she was taken aback, and enquired: 'Do you want to say something to me, Daddy?'

'Yes,' answered the old man gravely. 'I have heard that you want to sell Babaroaga.'

'Oh, that's what it is!' said Nadina, slightly disappointed. 'Are you interested?'

'You should know how much I am interested,' rejoined Miron. 'Possibly I might buy it myself.'

'All right, then, we'll talk it over!' agreed Nadina, smiling. 'Actually, I don't like business with my relatives, but my darling daddy is an exception. Do you want me to pledge my goodwill? Here you are.'

She kissed him on both cheeks. The old man took her head between his hands and gazed into her dewy eyes.

'This is a serious matter, Nadina.'

'Of course!' she answered, with the same indifferent smile.

Miron was not entirely satisfied with her reply; it seemed to him that she was not treating the matter with proper gravity. Possibly the sale of an estate did not seem very serious business to her, but on the other hand she might just be trying to avoid the issue. So he left her to rest after her tiring journey. Thus Grigore, when he returned, found her in an armchair alone, her eyes closed.

'Why did you bring that fellow along?' he asked accusingly, realizing that she was not asleep.

'What fellow?' she said in a surprised tone; then, with a short, ironical laugh. 'Oh, you mean Raul. Are you jealous again, Grig? It seems you'll never be cured of this horrible disease.'

Nadina stood up and stretched her arms sideways as if expecting an embrace. Her slim, restless form seemed to radiate life, and sensual allurements. She looked up at Grigore with inviting eyes, shining with eternal animation, and her softly curved mouth melodiously whispered: 'You silly thing - don't you love me any more?'

Breathing in her fragrance, Grigore tried in vain to resist, knowing he was yielding. With sudden, deep pain the idea flashed into his head that she was playing with him. But then all his thoughts melted into fierce desire. Coming nearer, she pressed herself against him, her arms still stretched apart. Grigore was only aware of her eyes, her mouth, her breasts. Suddenly he seized her round the waist and pushed her back into the chair, kissing her greedily. In the same voice, Nadina whispered in his ear: 'Not here . . . I don't want to, here . . .'

She slipped through his arms and took his hand. Like a faithful dog, Grigore followed her.

6

Next day, immediately after lunch, Titu went to his room to get ready for his visit to Lespezi. He had been making plans all night,

only to reject them in the morning as useless. Clearly he could expect nothing from Gogu Ionescu, who had not even recognized him.

He had learnt since his arrival that Lespezi village lay somewhere near, it would be about the same distance away as between Pripas and Jidovița at home, a distance he had often walked twice or even three times in a day. Nevertheless, it was best to make sure, so he went to ask the steward. In the courtyard of the manor he met a young man whose face seemed familiar, and who removed his hat, smiling.

'Why, what are you doing here?' Titu asked, recognizing Petre Petre, whom he had met at Mendelson the shoemaker's.

'I only arrived yesterday, and I've come to call at the manor,' Petre answered.

Young Herdelea shook hands with him, and Petre willingly offered to accompany him to Lespezi, as he had nothing else to do. Under the pretext of enquiring about the compensation the old boyar had promised for the forest accident last winter, he had called to have a word with Marioara. Because of the new arrivals, and especially of Nadina, there was a great bustle going on, with all the girls rushing to and fro, so that he could only with difficulty snatch a few words with her. But even so, he was content. He had also met the old boyar, who had congratulated him on his good-conduct record in the army.

On the way to Lespezi he opened his heart to Titu, telling him how he wanted to settle down, for poor Marioara had waited two years already, but he still did not know if he would be able to manage a wedding that winter, for it would cost a lot of money, and neither of them had any. Here Titu involuntarily recalled Ion Glanetaș, in his native village, who also, like Petre Petre, had complained of poverty. He tried to console Petre as far as he could with kind words, just to say something.

'Still, maybe the boyars will take pity on us, and let us have some land; people are saying they will,' said Petre, looking at him enquiringly, as if clutching at a last shred of hope.

'You mean you think the boyars will actually give you land?' asked Titu in amazement, 'without any money; just share the land with you?'

'Well, yes, after all they have too much, and we haven't got any at all,' answered the young man. 'In fact, I heard a lot of boyars saying in Bucharest that the land must be divided among the people, because it wasn't fair that the people who work on it shouldn't own any of it.'

Young Herdelea nodded: 'Well, things would be very nice as you put it, but quite frankly I don't believe it's possible. Nobody likes to divide what he has with others. Now tell me honestly, would you?'

'I suppose you're right, I wouldn't,' muttered Petre sadly. 'But that means we shall go under, because we can't go on carrying the burden.'

They went on for a few seconds without speaking and then Petre broke the silence as if tortured by one thought: 'But if they won't decide themselves to do something about it, who can force them? We haven't got any power.'

Titu saw that his companion had been labouring under a delusion, and was sorry to have shattered his hopes. He wished he could make up for it somehow. But fortunately they now arrived at Lespezi, and he was able to change the subject.

'But it's quite near. We've only just started, and now here we are!'

At that moment, a bare-headed man of striking appearance emerged hurriedly from a backyard nearby. His hair was long and untidy, he had a sparse brown beard, and large, black, lively eyes. He wore a long grey smock and carried a striped bag tied to a stick; his feet were bare.

In a clear voice, and with a burning expression, he addressed Titu, as if he had been expecting him for a long time: 'Beware, beware of passing by on the other side, master; the Day of Judgment is at hand, and you will regret that you did not hearken unto the Voice. Lo, the last trump is sounding, but the people are deaf, for they have stopped up their ears with the filth of sin. And horsemen with swords of fire shall come on white stallions, and the people will wonder, and will not understand that the Lord has sent them to punish the world for its evil-doing.'

Titu listened to this flow of words, especially struck by the man's appearance. Petre interrupted: 'That's enough, Uncle Anton; this gentleman has no time for your nonsense.'

But the stranger grew even more persistent: 'I speak no nonsense, Petre. Only fools cannot understand the Word; it comes not from me, but from He who knows all that is and all that is not!'

'All right, all right, that'll do!' said Petre, moving on with Herdelea, and explaining that poor Anton had once been a monk, but his brain had got a bit turned and he had run away from the monastery. He had been spreading these mad tidings for years now, living on the charity of the people.

Lespezi manor was ancient, modest and friendly. In its big yard, surrounded by farm buildings, stood a chaise with a black horse between the shafts. With it was a young man, whom Titu recognized as the son of the Greek lease-holder, Platamonu; whom he had met some days ago when he had been with Dragoș, the teacher. Aristide said that he had come with his father to see Gogu Ionescu, but had not wanted to go in, because these business conversations bored

him. Meanwhile, Petre asked Ileana to tell the boyars that a gentleman had come from Amara to see them. In no time the girl returned, inviting Titu to enter. Eugenia received him sweetly: 'So you've come! I'm so glad!'

And she really was. Eugenia was twenty-five and had been married for four years. Gogu loved her as much now as in the first days of their marriage, and agreed to her every whim, but he was nearly twice her age. She would not allow herself even to think of other men, feeling that she owed her husband not only faithfulness but gratitude for his boundless devotion. Nevertheless, sometimes she experienced an inexplicable yearning, which modern life, with its artificialities and conventions, did not satisfy. Nadina used to mock her; how could such a beautiful woman be happy with Gogu, who even went so far as having his hair dyed to make himself appear younger. But Eugenia, although she had acquired the ways and customs of the world in which she now lived, still remained in her heart the daughter of Pinteă, the priest in Lechința. That was why in the company of young Herdelea she felt as if she had returned home for a little while. They talked about Laura, his sister, and George, her brother, and recalled Sîngeorz, people and things in Transylvania. Then suddenly she recollected herself, and smiled wistfully: 'Gogu is a long time with his lease-holder! I must tell him you've arrived.'

She opened the door, and from within Gogu's voice was heard: 'I'm just coming, sweetheart!'

He appeared in the doorway, and saw Titu: 'Why didn't you tell me, darling? I finished my business with the Greek ages ago, and we were talking politics.'

He warmly shook hands with his guest, looking younger than he had the day before and in high spirits. Calling Platamonu in to join them, he told him he was a crook, but invited him to stay on for a good cup of coffee with them, though what he deserved was penal servitude for life. The Greek smiled cordially but excused himself, saying that he had some matters to arrange in the village, and had to go and report to the Lady Nadina. He went so far as to offer to take Mr Herdelea back to Amara with him later, if he wished it.

'Go on and potter round the village, then,' exclaimed Gogu, jovially. 'But don't think you're going to charm away my guests with that ramshackle old cart of yours. And you may be sure Nadina isn't anxious to see your fat face, for she knows very well that you cheat her too!'

He went to see Platamonu off, and returned, rubbing his hands cheerfully: 'Well, and now let us hear what our poet has to tell us!'

And Titu was made to relate how and when he had come to this country, what he had done, and how he had got on. When Gogu

heard the young man's story he became indignant, and excusing himself, interrupted loudly: 'Really, it's a disgrace! A poet comes from Transylvania and can't find a place in Rumania. Scandalous! . . . Poor chap!'

Young Herdelea was moved by so much interest in his affairs, and Gogu went on in a sentimental tone: 'Please do me the favour of not feeling bitter about all this. That's the first thing I want to tell you. Secondly, I, myself, will see to it that our family poet will feel at home in Rumania! Won't we, dearest?' he added to his wife. 'Of course!' chirped Eugenia. 'We must do something for him.'

When Platamonu had finished his affairs, and came back to call for Titu, Gogu had another pretext for chiding him: 'Well, since you're taking away my guest, I'm going to raise your rent! And tell Miss Nadina that tomorrow we'll come and have lunch with her, so that we can teach her how to raise the rent you have to pay for her estate as well. That's all, my friend!'

7

Platamonu drove and talked to Titu Herdelea and his son, but his mind was elsewhere. He did not want to show, even to Aristide, how much he was concerned about this journey to Amara. The entire future of the Platamonus depended on it. He loved land not only for the money it brought, if it was properly worked and efficiently managed, but especially for the stability it offered its possessor. To own an estate was the height of happiness, and had been his dream ever since he had become a lease-holder. Now, at last, his dream might come true. Nowhere would he find a finer estate than Babaroaga! The thing to be settled was its price. He knew that Nadina was always short of money; how many times had he not lent her some himself! And she was not at all fond of being a landowner, in fact she considered it a nuisance. Last spring she had asked him if he could not find her a serious buyer, adding that they would discuss the matter in greater detail in the autumn. He had told her simply that there probably would be plenty of interested people if her price was not too high, for money had become very scarce, and farming was not so profitable as it used to be. He had, of course, hinted that he might be interested himself, and she had understood.

Platamonu was a Rumanian-born Greek. He only spoke a few words of the language of his forefathers, but he had demonstrated his love of Hellenism by christening his children with its heroic names: the boy Aristide and the girl Helen. He had become naturalized, and hoped that one day his son would take up politics

and become a deputy. For that reason he spent money training the boy for the Bar, and pandered to all his wishes. Aristide, however, did not inherit his father's industrious spirit, preferring parties and the opposite sex to book-learning. Although he had been a student for three years, he had not taken a single examination, his excuse being that he wished to be thoroughly prepared first.

'Good afternoon, sir!' shouted the innkeeper, Busuioc, from his doorway as he saw the lease-holder pass.

Platamonu answered gaily, cracking some joke. He knew how to talk to the peasants, and was more popular than the other boyars in the district. Those in trouble went to the Greek first, because he was not a proud man, always listened to them, and at the very least would give them a kind word.

He left the chaise in the yard, and not in front of the manor, so as not to irritate the boyars. He had intended to take Aristide in with him to see Nadina, thinking that in front of an attractive young man any woman would want to be nice. But at the last moment he changed his mind. 'One never knows how things will turn out, and it would be a pity if the boy were present while anything unpleasant occurred.'

After the first few words, he felt this decision had been a wise one. Nadina was with her husband and Raul Brumaru, and greeted him with extreme sweetness, which was not a good sign.

'We were just talking about you; you must have known!'

The lease-holder managed a suitable smile and kissed her hand. The two men left as business was to be discussed. Nadina invited him to sit in the armchair vacated by Raul, near the fireplace, in which two great logs burned with lazy flickers. She seated herself in the other armchair, murmuring modestly: 'That's better, now we can talk quietly.'

Platamonu knew these preliminaries very well. Excessive consideration on Nadina's part meant that she wanted money. He tried to forestall her by telling her about the harvest which had been . . . But she interrupted him, smiling: 'Oh, yes. I know. The crop is always worse than the worst forecasts, either because it has rained or because there had been a drought, and prices are never good because money is scarce. You'd better let me tell you something more interesting.'

She went on to tell him that in the three months she had been abroad she had spent huge sums; even being compelled to go so far as to ask her husband for money, although this had been very awkward; Grigore had been very decent and had not interfered in her arrangements, and she had not liked to ask him for anything, especially as he had been somewhat against this trip. Here Platamonu thought it appropriate to remark that he had promptly answered

her letter to him, and had sent her the autumn money some months in advance, though God only knew how he had sweated to scratch it together in such difficult times. Nadina was unperturbed. Thanking him charmingly, she went on to say that she had come back without a penny, more than that, with a debt to her brother, Gogu. She had come to the country just to obtain his agreement to pay her in advance, although she badly needed a rest. She wanted the money as soon as possible, either all the next year's rent or a large part of it, so that she could rid herself of annoying material worries.

The lease-holder sighed deeply. Instead of the good bargain he had hoped for, it was rent in advance that was required; that was his luck. And what hopes he had entertained for this autumn! He answered sadly that he had always wanted to satisfy any request she made, and had made all sorts of sacrifices to meet her wishes, but unfortunately things had panned out very unluckily. He had worked very hard, but all to no avail. He was in danger of losing that small capital he had brought with him when he had come to her estate. The lady wanted the rent in advance, and, he, poor soul that he was, could not even cover the old one. He was eager to prove to her, pencil in hand, that however hard he might try, at the present prices, he could not provide even three-quarters of the rent, to say nothing of earning a small sum for himself, which he really deserved for his superhuman efforts.

Nadina lost her sweetness for a moment. But she suddenly recovered and smiled; remarking that there were plenty of lease-holders, but perhaps not as many estates. Platamonu agreed, but said that it all depended what sort of lease-holders, adding that one who really knew anything about the land would even pay less than half the present rent, which he himself had been compelled to give because the arrangements had already been made. It was true, of course, that in some areas rents had risen, but in those regions the peasants were so exploited that nobody knew what might happen. The peasants had woken up, they themselves wanted land too, and would not continue to suffer injustice or brutality in silence. Even in this district, where the agreements were fair, and nobody cheated them of a penny, they were evasive, agitated and murmuring. Only God knew what was going on in other parts.

Nadina was bored by this tirade. And the lease-holder, noticing this, stopped. A longer pause ensued, while Nadina looked at him searchingly, as if to see what lay behind the words of this Greek with such a mild, almost humble but especially impenetrable expression.

'Well, we'll see!' she said suddenly, slightly irritated, and motioning as if to end the conversation.

Platamonu felt that he had gone a little too far, and was awaiting

an opportunity to retreat somewhat. He knew she was excessively ambitious and quite capable of really looking for another leaseholder. That would be too much; instead of buying the estate to lose it completely!

At this moment Grigore came in, announcing that some peasants had come and were asking if she would grant them an interview, as they, too, wanted to buy the estate.

Nadina rose, amazed.

'But I haven't even discussed anything of the kind with this gentleman!'

She was at a loss what to do. Grigore insisted that she must receive them. The villagers were suspicious people, and they would feel it most unjust if they did not receive an answer from her personally. Nadina had never had anything to do with the peasants, and did not want to; she considered them wild and evil. After a moment's hesitation she said, shrugging her shoulders: 'Very well, if you say so, Grig. But they mustn't make the room dirty or bring in any smells!'

Luca Talabă entered, with some of his companions. They all brought a strong odour of garlic with them, which soon spread to the four corners of the room.

'Well, go on, tell the lady everything that's on your mind, don't be afraid!' Grigore encouraged them.

A short while ago, the peasants had been told by the innkeeper that the Greek had passed on his way to the Manor, to pave the way for a transaction concerning Babaroaga. After yesterday's conversation with the old boyar, the men had held another council, and had agreed to go to the lady Nadina, who had come from Bucharest. Now, however, they felt confused, particularly as the leaseholder was present. After a long silence, Luca Talabă, conquering his embarrassment, spoke, looking straight into Nadina's eyes: 'Well, lady, please excuse us for taking the liberty, but we heard that you wanted to sell the estate, and we thought it over, and what we say is why should it go to strangers, because after all it's us who've always worked on it, and we'll try to manage to . . .'

Nadina was upset, by Platamonu first of all, then by the smell of garlic, and now by the peasant's talk. She had not really thought of selling Babaroaga. Last spring, it was true, she had told the leaseholder that she wanted to be rid of the estate, but she had not made up her mind about it then. She had said it just for the sake of saying something, because she had not been able to get away from the leaseholder, and it was impossible to dismiss him from her presence summarily, just after he had handed over a sum of money. Now it seemed that from letting those few words drop a whole train of events had developed. Her father-in-law had raised the question

yesterday right out of the blue, and today it was the peasants. Only now did she understand why Platamonu had complained about the rent. She could not help smiling ironically, and glanced at him. He still sat in the armchair, his eyes on the peasants, with a look of petrified amazement on his face, which was intended to conceal his confusion; in his mind one thought persisted: 'It's just my luck!'

When she felt that the peasants had talked long enough, Nadina interrupted them by saying that for the time being she did not intend to sell her estate, and that was satisfied with Mr Platamonu, who always paid regularly and properly and did not oppress the peasants. The men were eager to agree, so that the lease-holder might not be offended: 'We've always got on well with the gentleman, that's true and fair enough!'

If she did decide to sell, she went on, she would not forget them. But they should not listen to rumours, which were produced by those who wanted to profit by them, or else by wicked people. Here Platamonu swallowed dryly, though she looked neither at him nor at the peasants.

As soon as they were alone again, the lease-holder enquired mildly: 'What are you going to do about me?'

Nadina answered: 'I'll think it over and see what I can do!'

Platamonu felt as if the earth was slipping away from under his feet. He tried to press the matter; when should he come again? The lady hesitated, and said that she did not know how many more days she would be staying in the country.

'Are you angry with me, madam?' asked the lease-holder suddenly desperate.

'Oh no, why should I be?' Nadina enquired, smiling and extending her hand. 'You haven't done me any harm, have you? No, I'm not!'

As Platamonu descended the stairs, he muttered to himself dejectedly: 'This really has been a bad day, blast it!'

8

A cold drizzle started on Tuesday afternoon. It came slowly, to last long; real autumn rain. Gogu Ionescu had come with Eugenia to Amara for lunch. It had been a happy meal, and had finished with a discussion of their plans for returning to Bucharest. Gogu had to be in the capital on Thursday for sure; he couldn't afford to be late. After all, he was a deputy, the Chamber was sitting in a fortnight, and he had to contact his fellow politicians first. He asked Titu Herdelea to accompany them, but at this Grigore protested; how could Gogu dare to suggest kidnapping his guest?

Actually, he had thought of sending Titu along with Nadina, so that she should not travel alone with Brumaru.

Before they had sat down to lunch, Grigore had called Gogu and Titu together for a private conversation. When Gogu heard about Baloleanu's offer, he grew angry. How could Grigore imagine that Baloleanu would be disinterested about anything? Clearly Grigoriță did not know him, although they were friends. He would just go on promising, and in the end he would do nothing. Grigore disagreed, though he wavered a little, but he added that in any case the boy – Titu, that is to say – couldn't just be left hanging in mid-air, and that they must . . .

'Now look here, I assure you that within twenty-four hours of my arrival in Bucharest this young man will have a job!' declared the deputy emphatically. 'I give you my word! And I am not Baloleanu!'

'Well, of course, if you really want to do something . . .' said Grigore. 'But you, too, are a bit dilatory, my dear Gogu, and . . .'

'Oh, please!' laughed his brother-in-law. 'I know when to be dilatory and when not to be!'

'You're in luck!' Grigore whispered to Titu later, when they were alone for a while. 'It seems that Eugenia is looking after your interests, there is so much energy in him!'

Young Herdelea had uttered not a word, but had listened eagerly. Not in vain had he been born under a lucky star, he thought excitedly. At lunch he ate with gusto and at the end of the meal, when Transylvanian *doinas*⁶ came under discussion, he sang 'It's a long road to Cluj', which was applauded by everybody. Even old Miron congratulated him, while Nadina, who normally jeered at Rumanian folk music, made him promise to come and sing her all the *doinas* he knew when he was in Bucharest. Gogu and Eugenia left in the downpour. Standing in the doorway and watching the wind blowing the lines of rain, Nadina said, shivering: 'I think I'll be in Bucharest even before Gogu!'

But old Iuga rubbed his hands in satisfaction: 'Never you mind, my dear, this rain is very good for the autumn sowing. It brings us in millions, absolutely millions!'

'That may be so, Daddy, but I don't like rain, even in town, and in the country I absolutely detest it!'

Grigore had changed since Nadina had arrived. After embracing her again he had realized that without her his life would be in ruins. He forgave her all her errors, feeling that he was responsible for them. After all, a woman like her had the right to live, she must live, must enjoy the homage of the world, not simply stay in obscurity, as he, prompted by an evil jealousy, would have liked her to. He had thought that her natural resistance to this attitude meant a lack of real affection. He had looked at her flirtations as crimes,

instead of realizing that they were just her natural desire to glitter. He had not understood that in her persistence in always offering him something new, in always being different, she merely desired – and succeeded – in being his mistress and his wife at the same time. He had frowned upon the most ordinary caprices, had even condemned her for liking to dance or travel!

Nevertheless, he had to watch himself even now, all the time, to control his natural instincts. Raul Brumaru's presence continued to annoy him, although the wretched fellow made tremendous efforts to prove his usefulness: he told anecdotes and made all sorts of silly puns, enquired about cattle-breeding, listened like a martyr to Grigore's agricultural theories; played cribbage with old Miron; called Titu 'thou' because he noticed that Grigore liked him, and endeavoured to cheer up Nadina with French jokes when he saw that she was bored. Grigore, however, still kept an eye on him, and surreptitiously watched all his movements, though he told himself that he exaggerated. He actually caught himself suspecting Nadina, even during their most intimate moments. It seemed to him that her kisses were not sincere, and that she murmured a certain word of love with a peculiar intonation. All the time he feared that she mocked his feelings.

His newly aroused love urged him to hasten his departure for Bucharest. In a week at the most he would finish his business here: he must persuade Nadina to wait for him.

'I think I'd die if I had to spend another week in this ghastly swamp!' she exclaimed, smiling. 'Why don't you, for once, give up your terribly important business matters, so that we could go together?'

Grigore promised that he would be ready by Sunday, but added that he did not want to keep her; he would not like her to be miserable, on the contrary, all he desired was that she should be happy and gay.

They decided to leave on Thursday, but then it was raining so hard that Nadina postponed her departure till Friday. Grigore thought that this was just a pretext to stay another night, and was delighted.

Friday morning brought a fine day. It had already stopped raining during the night, but in the road the mud and puddles were knee-deep. The car drew up at the steps, having circled the heart-shaped flower-bed, now decorated with scarlet autumn blooms, which smiled under the caress of the sun, newly emerged from a lacework of cloud. Stepping into the car, Nadina, having kissed Grigore several times, caught sight of the flowers, and said sweetly: 'Look Grig, your heart!'

Among the crowd of servants who sought to make themselves

useful, Titu noticed Petre, who was hanging around the manor in the hope of seeing Marioara and getting some work himself. After young Herdelea had said goodbye to Miron Iuga, and heartily thanked Grigore for inviting him, he shook hands with the young peasant.

'Good luck, my friend!'

'May God be with you, sir!' answered Petre warmly.

Hearing the strange voice, Nadina turned her head, and for a moment, her curious glance met his shining eyes.

The car started off down the cobbled drive at walking pace, for Grigore walked alongside, bareheaded. Nadina seated between the two men, blew him kisses with her gloved hand. When they reached the gate, Grigore told the chauffeur to stop for a moment, put his feet on the running board, and said: 'Excuse me, I want to say a couple of words to Nadina!'

Leaning over the door, he took her head in his hands and kissed the tip of her ear, whispering: 'I love you!'

Nadina, nostrils quivering, cooed: '*Mais tu es fou, petit chéri!*'

Then the car dashed away like a runner setting off down the course. Looking after it, Grigore saw only a small hand floating in the air above the heads like a white dove.

As the machine rapidly disappeared into the distance, splashing dirty water and mud right to the verges of the road, young Iuga heard a furious voice: 'The devil take you!'

Mother Ioana, who came along the side of the road, shaking her clothes and muttering, was covered in mud from head to foot.

Further down the lane, Nistor Mucenicu's Anghelina approached, one child sucking at her breast and another, some four years old, hanging on to her hand. This little boy, barefoot like his mother, kept stumbling in his long shirt, with which he trod in the mud. He whined continuously; 'Mum, I'm hungry . . .'

And the woman, trying to soothe him, dragged him by the arm, and said wearily: 'Quiet, lovey, quiet!'

The car and the white gloved hand disappeared. Grigore Iuga shuddered as if woken from a dream. All he could hear was the child whimpering and the old woman grumbling: 'The devil take you!'

THE LIGHTS

I

For two days Titu Herdelea had to recount his adventures and how he had spent his time in the country. First his landlady, Mrs Alexandrescu, made him tell her everything, for when she was not talking about Jenică or Mimi she was always just dying to find out everybody else's affairs and gossip about them. He had to spend a whole evening with the Gavrilăş family, and then young Mendelson, the shoemaker's son, now demobbed, came especially to enquire about the sufferings of the peasants, and to explain, raging with revolt, that social injustices were growing so unbearable, that the desperate masses would have to take justice into their own hands, and then everything would collapse in blood and fire. •

Naturally young Herdelea did his share of showing off, within moderation that is, for until he had seen the results of his stay in high society, he did not like to say too much. He was most enthusiastic about Nadina, who seemed to him the most bewitching creature, and let it be understood that she liked him, although in fact she had not taken much notice of him and had only addressed a few words to him even in the car, where she had entertained herself in French all the time with Raul Brumaru.

On Sunday morning, he presented himself in Strada Argintari, at Gogu Ionescu's. Of course, the latter had already promised to arrange things for him within twenty-four hours, but it wouldn't do any harm to take advantage of the customary courtesy call to remind him of it.

'Everything's settled,' cried the deputy triumphantly. 'You can go tomorrow and present yourself at *Drapelul*, and start work. You ask for Mr Deliceanu; don't forget the name. He's the editor. Tell him I sent you. The salary is nothing remarkable, but we'll see that it improves later on.'

Titu, stunned with joy and amazement, stammered out a few words of thanks and admiration. Gogu liked to be admired. On the appearance of Eugenia, who had been told nothing of all this,

so that it should be a surprise, Gogu recounted with great gusto all the details and stages of the campaign: why should he, a respectable deputy, go cap-in-hand to *Adevărul* and *Universul*, and risk meeting with a refusal? There was, after all, his own party's newspaper, and Deliceanu was a colleague in the Chamber, as well as being a personal friend. He would go to Deliceanu! The latter was a pleasant, helpful fellow and agreed without any difficulty, but referred him to the managing director. So off he went. But there it was cold and doleful. The managing director was a fat Jew, with gold-rimmed spectacles. He started off by theorizing and talking about figures, saying that the expenses of the paper were tremendous, and circulation was very low, although the literary style was so elegant; readers these days did not appreciate style and polemics, all they looked for was crime and scandal, and so on.

'After two hours of talking,' Gogu declared, 'I lost my temper. Getting up, I thrust my hands into my pockets and said firmly: "I'm not interested, all I want is satisfaction, otherwise . . ." And it worked! That was enough. He answered: "Very well, sir. If you put it like that I cannot refuse you".'

Naturally, Gogu did not inform his admiring audience that when he had thrust his hands into his pocket he had taken out his wallet and paid six months' salary in advance for his protégé, the sum being registered as a donation from Deputy Ionescu.

Eugenia, hugging him, congratulated him charmingly, thus contributing to swell his self-satisfaction. Then they both wished the young man the best of luck, and invited him to lunch the day after he had contacted the paper.

'I hope you'll mention me in your articles from time to time!' whispered Gogu, half-seriously, as he saw his guest to the door.

First of all, Titu was impatient to see a copy of *Drapelul*. He had never set eyes on the paper or heard of it. He looked for it at some ten kiosks before he finally secured a copy, opening it at once and examining it keenly. It seemed to him stupid, empty and dull, like a parliamentary speech. For a moment he was disappointed; he had hoped for something different. But what was he to do? It was good enough as a beginning.

Reaching his room, he sat down to read it through from the title to the name of the publisher, so as to become familiar with the style. As he struggled through an endless article signed by a senator, Jean knocked at his door: 'Do come over for a moment, *mon cher*, so that my sister Tanța can meet you. Lenuța has advertised you such a lot you might be some holy relic from the cathedral!'

Mrs Alexandrescu wanted to ingratiate herself with Jenică's family, and zealously sought suitors for Tanța, the more so as the girl's parents were very anxious about their daughter's future. The

good looks the Lord had given her were her only dowry. At the moment, Titu was the good lady's choice; he paid his rent regularly, was a well-behaved young man, mixed with the gentry and then, being a journalist, one never knew whether he might not become a deputy, like Costel Petrescu, who had been with her husband at the military school.

'See what an angel has descended among us, Mr Herdelea!' sighed Mrs Alexandrescu in a sugary tone.

Tanța coloured; she was tall and slender, and had enchantingly dewy, sparkling green eyes. The young man was quite dazed for a moment, a fact which Mrs Alexandrescu noticed with satisfaction. After a few moments she said diplomatically.

'Well, we have to go now. As you see, we're all dressed to go out. I just wanted you to meet her so that you could admire her. But don't be sad, I promise I will take you to her family one afternoon, and you can start courting her there if you like!'

Titu went back to the senator's article. But between the prosy lines Tanța's green eyes glittered, and he saw her smiling lips, all the more tempting for their unexpected appearance.

Next day he reported at the offices of the paper. A lad showed him in to the editorial secretary. In a large room a man, spectacled, unshaven and gloomy, sat alone, turning over a great pile of newspapers which lay on a big desk in front of him; in his hand was a huge pair of scissors. He glanced at the visitor and continued his work. Having finished, he pushed away the remnants of paper to make space for himself. When he heard that Herdelea was looking for Deliceanu, he said in a bored voice: 'The editor isn't often in the office, he only comes occasionally; I don't think you'll track him down very easily. But if you have something for the paper, you can speak to the chief sub-editor, who should be here any minute – or you can tell me, if you like!'

On hearing Titu's explanation, the secretary wrinkled up his nose in a grimace: 'H'm – they never stop coming. We've got more journalists than readers, but even so if we couldn't use the scissors on other papers I don't know how we should manage! On pay-day the office is crowded, but when you want a write-up you can't find anybody. Still, that's up to the editorial board; I washed my hands of the whole business long ago!'

To confirm that Herdelea had told the truth, he scribbled something on a sheet of paper and sent the messenger up to the managing director. The answer arrived promptly, and the secretary continued: 'Well, everything is in order; you are on our staff. Perhaps you have the itch to write as well, eh?'

As time passed, the secretary, a good-hearted man, opened out towards Titu. He considered himself to be the most efficient editorial

secretary in Rumania, and was piqued when others did not share the same opinion. It disgusted him that he had to slave harder than a porter on an obscure little rag, while others, who were not in the same street with him, grew fat and made a name for themselves on papers with big circulations. As young Herdelea came from Transylvania, the secretary gave him the job of collecting news from the German and Hungarian press concerning Rumania and Rumanians living over there, straight away offering him a large pile of untouched newspapers. Nobody in the office knew any foreign language except French, so that no one else could read them. Herdelea could take them home with him if he liked, and look at them at his leisure. Also, he must not scribble too much; concise and lively items were what a bright newspaper needed. Unfortunately *Drapelul* . . . It would be fine if in addition Titu could write at least one editorial a week. He should try, anyway. These stupid politicians had absolutely swamped the secretary with their stuffy articles. But Titu must not forget that the paper was the official mouthpiece of the government, so he must be careful, especially as besides the present leader the party had a whole flock of other aspirants, who had formed a clandestine opposition within the party and were constantly on the lookout for a *faux pas* to use it against the official leadership.

'So that's how things are, my dear fellow!' the secretary concluded amiably. 'You can work at home until you get used to the trade. But please always be here in the morning in case I need you!'

His name was Roșu.

Titu went straight home, shut himself in his room, and eagerly started work. Now, he told himself, all roads were open to him, all he needed was application and a determination not to be discouraged. Mrs Alexandrescu had gone with Jenică for a long session at cards with his parents. There was complete silence, only broken occasionally by a cry or a muttered curse from the courtyard outside, with its many tenants. Towards evening, just as he had finished writing, he heard steps in the parlour. It must be his pupil, Marioara, he thought happily. After so many hours of work, a feminine presence would be welcome, even if it was only hers. He hurried to the door to welcome her.

'Is Mummy at home?' enquired Mimi in a calm voice.

'Taken aback, the young man answered: 'No, she isn't, but . . . but do come in! I will . . .'

The diminutive blonde allowed a smile to quiver on her lips, and said: 'Well, now that I am here, I may as well see the poet's nest!'

Emotion flamed up within Titu, he kissed her hand several times, and asked her to stay just a few moments to quench his desire just to look at her; since he had met her the other day, somehow she had always been in his mind . . . Mimi interrupted as if she had

not been listening or had known beforehand what he would say: 'This used to be my room before I married. When I came home for the school holidays I slept here. Mother never let the room in those days. How many wonderful dreams I had in this little bed!'

Encouraged, the young man invited her to take off her coat, murmuring the while: 'Miss Mimi, please . . . I don't bite, honestly I don't!'

Mimi burst out laughing: 'Of course not - I wouldn't let you . . . leave any marks on me!'

Then, to calm him a little, she added softly: 'I do quite like you, but . . .'

At this, Titu, quite overcome, greedily took her in his arms and closed her mouth with a thirsty kiss, moving nearer to the bed.

She accepted his embrace with a murmur of satisfaction, but gently released herself, whispering: 'You naughty boy! Do you want me to be sorry I came in? No, not now, really, I can't! Another time! You must be patient!'

She arranged her tiny hat over the blonde curls, already standing with her back to the door. In order to avoid a new attack she took hold of the handle: 'Now be a sweet, good boy, promise? I'm off! I just popped in so that mother should know that I had been to see her. See you soon, you impatient thing!'

After she had departed, her smile of promise still lingered in the air.

2

This season was to be richer and gayer than ever. Nadina was feverish with excitement. In November alone there was the opening of Parliament, and performances of Eleonora Duse and Feraudy, to say nothing of the Paderewski concert. She had bought herself several things in Paris on her way home, but now to her horror realized that she had practically no clothes at all, compared with the multitude of events which imperatively demanded her presence.

Grigore's arrival from the country had been delayed for a couple of days. His father didn't let him go before they had closed the accounts, to enable the old man to live in peace until February. As a matter of fact, this had suited the young man, for he had decided to spend the whole winter in the capital with Nadina.

'At last!' she said, when she heard his decision.

She immediately made him book the best box for the shows which had been announced, remarking that she would consider it a

permanent stain on her honour if she missed one of them. Her husband became quite exhausted running hither and thither. Wanting to save him trouble sometimes, Nadina would say: 'If you're tired of running around, let Raul go; he's very good at such matters.'

Whereupon Grigore would protest that he was not at all tired, though he was. He was, however, hoping that he could somehow manoeuvre Raul away from Nadina's company. Not that he was jealous, he would say to himself, but because the man was such a fool. Grigore's newly aroused love had no place for jealousy; he must be both husband and lover, in the same manner as she, in order to keep her.

Nadina was too busy in the whirl of her society affairs to notice her husband's efforts; though she would hardly have observed them under other circumstances. It seemed natural and inevitable that everybody should love her. She had been used to it all her life; it had begun with her father, who had always idolized her and even now brightened up as soon as he saw her. In fact, she did not know any love at all, except love for herself. She refused herself nothing, for she considered that everything was due to her. Even the pleasure or satisfaction of yielding to temptation were unknown to her, for everything seemed to her to be a natural attribute of her beauty. She had never been unfaithful to Grigore in a moment of passion; any more than she smoked because she liked the taste of tobacco. These things were done because she felt she must commit every extravagance, just to be above other women, as a divine being. Time and again she contemplated her body completely naked in the mirror, and wondered how it could combine so many superb forms and lines. She walked the whole morning unclothed in her apartment so that she could admire herself at her leisure.

To her, Raul Brumaru was just a whim, a little adornment, as necessary to an elegant woman as a lapdog or a lucky charm. For a long time he had sighed for her, as others had, and in the end she had accepted him not for love, but because she did not care. People considered him an amusing boy, and he was a credit to her when he was around. She was more at ease with him than with Grigore, for whom she still had a certain - even if only theoretical - respect. With Raul she did not feel the need to display any tenderness; neither did he expect any, he was content with the crumbs of the feast. In particular, he was her dancing partner, and as such, extremely useful.

Towards men like Brumaru, Grigore felt an instinctive repulsion. He despised the man, sincerely feeling that Nadina compromised herself by tolerating him in her company. He blamed himself for allowing things to go so far; he should have prevented it, but not by making scenes, for this would have only increased her determination

to continue. His love should have been all-pervading. If only he had understood her from the beginning, he would not have lost four years of happiness; he would not have let the gap between them grow so wide that now he had to build bridges across it.

The moment he admitted his fault, he of course decided generously to make up for all the past. Nadina had to be sheltered from any temptation, not by removing it, but through his own presence, by satisfying it. Comprehending her financial worries, he offered to meet them, giving a flattering explanation: 'I want my wife to be the most brilliant of all!'

Nadina could not believe her ears. She had become used to the fact that, in a delicate manner and for plausible reasons, he lacked interest in her expensive society life. Nevertheless, she responded in an easy voice: 'It's very sweet of you, darling, and thank you very much, but I'm afraid the figures will frighten you.'

'No figure can frighten me if it is for you!' Grigore answered, with a look burning with submissive love.

At this time they did things they had never done during the whole course of their marriage: for instance they seriously discussed her clothes. She showed him the latest models in the fashion magazines, explaining details of cut, cloth and accessories. He, in his turn, was deeply interested, and treated the matter in all seriousness, as if it were a vital problem. The discussion went on for days, and Nadina discovered to her amazement that he had an excellent taste in women's fashions, too, as well as original ideas. She said suddenly: 'I thought agriculture was your only passion; I see that I was wrong.'

Grigore smiled.

'You have been my only passion ever since I met you. I too was mistaken, when I thought differently.'

After they had been in Bucharest a fortnight, Platamonu presented himself. At first Nadina hesitated to receive him. As Grigore had offered to help her, she did not need the lease-holder's assistance urgently, for Gogu would surely allow her to postpone payment of the debt she had incurred with him abroad.

Platamonu started by giving his reason for coming to Bucharest; he had profited by the fact that his son had to come to register at the University to accompany him so as to have an opportunity to disperse the cloud of regrettable misunderstanding which had arisen between them. The boy's matters had been arranged quickly. He was to go straight back home as he could read better there and prepare for the examinations, which he definitely wanted to pass after Christmas. Thus Platamonu had time to go on his own errands. He had done his best, and had squeezed out half of the spring rent,

bringing as a token that he would even do the impossible to please the lady Nadina. There was just one small favour he wanted to ask, and he was sure that, in view of his devoted service, she would not refuse him. It was, of course, about Babaroaga. He had heard the lady Nadina herself say that for the time being she did not want to sell it. Nevertheless, as the rumours persisted, and as he heard from the peasants that boyar Miron wanted to buy it, too, he was making so bold as to declare that he was interested in it as well. He would ask her that in confirming receipt of the advance-payment on next year's rent she should mention that, providing that his offer would be better and accepted, she would consider it as surety. For her this would be a mere formality, to him it would be some sort of vague assurance, but still precious, as a token of confidence and a recognition of his loyal service.

Nadina listened without interruption. The only thing that seemed important was that Platamonu had brought the money. She knew from her father that money should never be refused. The favour he asked her had no value, for she had no intention whatever of selling Babaroaga. Selling would be even more boring than letting. Trouble had arisen at the mere hint of a sale.

'Where did you get all the idea that I wanted to sell my estate?' she asked. 'Everybody is saying that I want to sell it, and making propositions to me. I am the only person who doesn't know anything about it, and it is only fair that I should know something about it too. You are a reasonable man, Mr Platamonu, and I must tell you one thing: I'm not selling, definitely not, and I don't intend to! Is that sufficiently clear, precise and definite?'

'Then my small request can bother you even less!' persisted Platamonu smoothly, thinking to himself that with the ladies nothing was ever definite and clear, and that what they wanted yesterday and refused today, they might well accept tomorrow, one never knew.

'Well,' she said carelessly. 'All right, just as you like. I simply wanted to warn you, so that you should not come later and say this and that.'

Later she told Grigore about the incident. She had no desire to hide such matters from him, particularly as she now had a large sum of money, and so his expenses would be less. Grigore remarked, as he had done many times before, that she was the sole master of her income and that he did not want to meddle in her affairs, but in his opinion she should not have made even the slightest promise to Platamonu. Why should her hands be tied in the future?

Nadina regretted that she had told him; it was useless, Grig was so pedantic and irritating. He noticed her annoyance and added hastily: 'Perhaps I exaggerate . . . Don't be cross with me, Nadina. Be gay! Your smile is my life!'

'It's a pity you can't read, Chirilă. Come here and look at this!'

The office of the estate was a small room with a pinewood table and several stools. It was in the same building as the servants' quarters. Platamonu took out of his fat wallet a piece of white paper and waved it under the eyes of the steward.

'See this little scrap of paper, Chirilă? See it? Look! Well, this is Babaroaga, my lad!' he shouted exultantly. 'Look at it! You can tell the people they needn't waste their time hanging round the manor any more!'

'May you have health to hold it!' said Chirilă respectfully.

'God grant it!' responded Platamonu. 'All my life, Chirilă, I have worked, and in my old age I deserve a piece of land. I can't rest even at night; you know it very well. I run about and sweat, and I don't shrink from lending you a hand – not like other boyars, who drink coffee on the balcony and wait for everything to fall into their lap. And still, people don't let me breathe, and try to elbow me to one side. Now, is that just? Tell me straight, Chirilă, you're a sensible man!'

'The people aren't against you, sir!' the steward protested. 'But they haven't got any land, either, you see, and that's why they try so hard.'

'I don't say they shouldn't have land, either, do you think I would?' said the lease-holder, folding up his paper. 'Let them have land, Chirilă. But why pick on my estate?'

The Greek had been waiting for a long time to hold forth on this matter. It had seemed to him that the peasants had been ungrateful when they had appeared as his rivals in front of Nadina. Actually, he himself did not consider the receipt to be as valuable as all that, but he used it to strengthen his position in the eyes of the villagers. He was also in need of a little comfort just now because of Aristide. The fact that his son had wanted to return home with him, instead of staying in Bucharest and having a good time, filled Platamonu with concern, the more so as he could not console himself by telling his wife, who was a weak creature, about it. He was worried lest his son had got himself entangled with some girl in these parts, and thus might ruin his prospects or do something foolish. Aristide was very close and never told his father anything, and Platamonu, as a parent, felt it impossible to ask him, and this perhaps upset him. His heart was filled with foreboding, and he shivered.

Chirilă was burning with impatience to pass on the news he had received from Platamonu. It was impossible to get away from work at Gliganu during the week, so he had to wait until Sunday, when

he had time to hurry home to Amara, look after his own affairs, and unburden his soul. He stopped his cart outside Busuioc's inn, where people always gathered after church, got off, and sent his wife and daughter on home. People stood outside the building, sheltering under the eaves from the rain, each telling the other his troubles. Chirilă greeted them and entered. In the middle of a crowd stood Luca Talabă, arguing with the mayor; the others were not saying much. Upon seeing Chirilă, he shouted joyfully, as if he had found an ally: 'The Lord has sent you at last, Chirilă. Look here, you must know . . .'

The innkeeper took the opportunity to organize his customers: 'Now, look, why are you all standing around and blocking the way, so that people can't get past? Sit down at the tables, nobody will bite you and I won't charge you anything. Look, over there. Come on, now. Come on, Mr Mayor, you should take the lead, the others will follow.'

He managed to get everyone seated and served at last.

Ion Pravilă, with increasing ferocity, was talking about Baba-roaga. It was not just, he said, that those whom the Lord had already made rich should have still more land, while the poor remained in their misery.

'See, that's how he keeps on talking, hours at a time!' remarked Luca irritably to Chirilă Păun.

'Well, I agree with the mayor,' interrupted Trifon Guju. 'I don't think you're right, Uncle Luca. Honestly I don't. Because if you try to buy the land, then how do you expect the king to give you any?'

Against a general murmur of approval, Talabă asked harshly: 'How do you know that the king will divide the land among the people?'

'Everybody has heard about it except you!' answered Trifon reproachfully.

'He must divide it, otherwise we can't go on living' added a deep, smothered voice, sounding as if it had burst from the bowels of the earth.

Luca Talabă understood that the majority was against him, and changed his tone: 'It would be fine if it really did happen as you say, but I'm afraid we'll be left with more words, while other people get the land. And if I fight, do I fight only for myself, Trifon, or for everybody? I can still manage to scrape along somehow, thank God! But what I say is: why should others take away the estate we have worked on? Why shouldn't we own it, all of us? I wouldn't divide it just between Marin Stan and me, but between all of us who really want to work - with you, Ignat, and with you, Trifon, and anybody who wants to. Only let the Lord help us to lay our hands on it! Now tell us, don't you think I'm right?'

The discussion had been a long one. The mayor gave a superior smile; his feelings had been wounded, for they had kept away from him. Chirilă Păun, however, felt embarrassed. Several times he had wanted to interrupt Luca, but had not had the heart, seeing him so hopeful. In the end, when somebody mentioned that the Greek had been to Bucharest to press his claim to Babaroaga, he felt the moment was opportune, and put in: 'Yes, he did go, and it wasn't in vain, either!'

Luca's enthusiasm was suddenly cut short. Busuioc, who had been behind the bar, also came up to hear.

After Chirilă had told them the news he had received from Platamonu, Pravilă said crossly: 'Why didn't you tell us right away, instead of letting us go on arguing and quarrelling, when the Greek had the paper in his pocket?'

Others were muttering, too. The mayor, forgetting the offence he had suffered, said, worried: 'Well . . .'

But then Luca Talabă rose involuntarily and as if the shock had affected his voice and his expression, said between clenched teeth: 'They won't get away with it. We won't let them!'

Others voices took him up, some quietly, some more fiercely: 'No, we won't!'

4

The capital wore a festive smile, with tricolour flags fluttering from all the main buildings. Calea Victoriei was strewn with fine, ash-grey sand. A huge crowd had taken possession of the pavements. Between the clouds a yellow sun gazed down indifferently. The royal procession slowly moved towards the Palace on Metropolitan Hill, the hooves of the escorting cavalry rattling upon the tarmac. In the first chaise, the Chief of Police stood stiffly erect, his top-hat on the back of his head, vehemently gesturing like a petulant drum-major and looking back from time to time.

Within, the Chamber of Deputies hummed discreetly like a hive before swarming. The galleries, filled with ladies, had the appearance of rows of multi-coloured flowers. Diamonds glittered like drops of morning dew on smooth petals. The diplomatic gallery was gay with the uniforms of military attachés, together with the chiefs of foreign missions, in the international uniform of their trade, looking like ancient, fusty rosettes.

All around there gleamed dress shirts, bald heads, and medals. Hundreds of arms were extended in handshakes. In front of the President's chair was a crowd of tail-coats. Now and then one of

the nation's representatives glanced up, looking for his guests in the gallery or blowing a kiss to a smiling woman.

'Look, there's Gogu!' exclaimed Eugenia excitedly to Nadina, who wore a complacent smile.

Down below, Gogu Ionescu jovially made a number of unintelligible signs. Nadina assumed that he was enquiring whether they liked the seats he had obtained for them, and responded by silently moving her lips, mouthing: 'Very good, Thank you. Perfect. You were wonderful.'

Gogu disappeared among the tail-coats, but appeared again after some minutes holding Raul Brumaru by the arm. The latter greeted them ceremoniously, saying something which nobody could hear.

'What is that fellow doing in the deputies' enclosure?' demanded Grigore from behind Eugenia.

'Why do you ask?' enquired Nadina easily. 'He never misses anything. And besides, he has so many connections, he can get in anywhere.'

Suddenly there was a stir in the enclosure. More tail-coats came pouring in through the side doors. Through the door on the right the prelates entered ceremoniously in their rich attire, and from the left advanced the generals, in glittering dress uniform, all ribbons and gold braid. An alarmed voice roared from near the entrance: 'His Majesty the King!'

There was a moment of portentous silence, and then a storm of applause, dying away only when the King took his papers from the hand of the Prime Minister. Placing his spectacles carefully upon his nose, he started to read: 'Honourable senators and deputies . . .'

Almost every sentence was punctuated by a fresh wave of applause, sometimes more enthusiastic, sometimes less, whereupon the King was forced to pause, looking over his glasses at the mosaic of faces, all directing their gaze towards him like thousands of rays focussing on a magic prism.

' . . . I entertain a consistent concern for the welfare of the toiling peasantry, the sound, strong basis of our state, on which the nation's future depends.'

Here Grigore's voice, dry with emotion, was heard amidst the burst of applause: 'Hear, hear!'

Nadina turned her head slightly towards him to chide him.

The reading finished, ovations followed the King as he departed through the door, and everybody began to leave.

'A nice show, wasn't it?' murmured Nadina in the corridor. 'And how fine the King looked!'

Outside waited elegant chaises and noisy motors, there were many

smiles and handshakes, accompanied by martial music as bandsmen in the guard of honour played a military march.

The dog barked madly as the rain steadily poured down.

'Go and see who's there, man. The bitch might bite somebody, and bring more evil down on our heads!'

Ignat Cercel, muttering to himself, moved heavily from the bench. As he opened the door to the porch, the pig, snuffling outside as usual in an effort to get in, nearly knocked him off his feet as it entered. Ignat went out, remarking: 'Let him be, blast him.' On the threshold he paused and shouted: 'Damn you and your accursed family, you devil, shut up!'

From where he stood he could see Birzotescu, the tax-collector, in the middle of the courtyard, stamping in the mud and fending off the dog with his open umbrella. Behind him stood the village guard.

'So you wait for me to come to your place, Ignat, and in such weather too? You don't have much consideration for me!'

Taken aback, Ignat first threw a stone at the dog: 'Shut up, you bastard, don't you understand?'

Then he sweetened his tone: 'Me wait for you, sir? Bless me, no! But, you see, poverty holds us fast. Otherwise I would have come long ago: I know very well where the village hall is, and there's nothing wrong with my legs, thank the Lord!'

Carefully shaking the water off his umbrella and closing it, the tax-collector approached and remarked: 'When you've got to pay the tax you talk about poverty, but you're always at the inn! I know you all, Ignat! It's a waste of time trying to fool me! I'm ruining my best years and my health on you!'

'What's that about the inn?' the peasant protested. 'Why, I can't remember when I had a taste of brandy last; we really can't think of drinking because . . .'

'Be quiet now, I haven't come to talk!' interrupted Birzotescu, entering the cottage.

The wife crouched near the fireplace, quite still, her four children grouped around her, like a hen frightened by a sparrow-hawk. The pig grunted with satisfaction, raising its head in surprise. The tax-collector paused stiffly in the middle of the small room, and looked round him carefully. He was tall and lanky, and his head reached the beams of the ceiling. Taking the register from the guard, he made a note and tore off a sheet.

'Listen, Ignat!' he said, severely. 'This time I'll put your pig down, as I can't see anything else of any value. Do you hear me? For the time being I won't take it, so that you can't say I'm a hard

man. But don't think I shall wait more than a week, for the higher-ups don't wait for me either. Nor shall I come here again and ruin my boots in the puddles, because you'd let me go barefoot before you'd buy me new ones. So, Ignat, you'd better come soon, otherwise the pig comes to me, and you won't get it back!

At this the woman burst out bitterly: 'Oh Lord, sir, you wouldn't take our piglet away? The children'll starve, it's all we got and we've had a job to feed it - we can't keep any cattle because we haven't got any fodder or maize.'

Completely ignoring her, Bîrzotescu walked out, bending himself almost double to avoid knocking his head against the beam of the door. Miserably, Ignat saw him off through the yard, as was proper, complaining all the time and mumbling apologetically: 'What can we do, Mr Bîrzotescu, what can we do?'

Aristide Platamonu had sent the maid for the steward's daughter, Gherghina. Only she knew how to press his trousers elegantly, with a crease, not like the other stupid wenches who didn't even know how to heat the iron properly.

He was alone in the house. His father was at a trial at Costești, having called in Chirilă Păun as a witness. They had left in the morning in the chaise with Mrs Platamonu, taking Chirilă and his wife along as well. The Greek had wanted Aristide to accompany them, but he had refused; he would take advantage of his solitude to do some serious reading. His sister had left a week ago for Pitești, to stay with the family of a friend and breathe some urban air.

Gherghina shyly entered her young master's room, the maid at her side.

'Look here, my girl, you're clever and handy; I'm sure you'll do me a favour . . .'

He explained what he wanted. The iron was heated, and the trousers laid out on the table, a wet cloth beside them. He drove away the silly maid.

'Well, I'll try, master,' Gherghina said, frightened by the scolding the maid had received. 'But I don't know whether I'll be able to do it right . . .'

She started pressing the trousers. Aristide stood by her side, watching. Her supple body was slightly bent over the iron. On her head, her scarlet kerchief was tied closely, leaving bare her smooth, slightly curved neck. Looking down between her shoulder and head, held to one side, the young man observed, beneath the thin, open-necked blouse, her full, shapely, rounded breasts, with nipples like delicate buds. He bent slightly forward and touched her neck with

his lips. Gherghina started, and turned two horror-filled eyes towards him.

'Why do you think I sent for you, Gherghina?' he whispered, taking the iron from her hand and putting it on the stand. 'Just for that, do you think?' pointing contemptuously towards the iron. 'A beautiful girl like you?'

Gherghina retreated towards the door, her eyes fixed on his with the same expression. He took her hand: 'Tell me, you're not really afraid of me? Tell me truly. How can you be? And it was because of you that I didn't stay in Bucharest, sweetheart . . .'

She tried to get to the door again. But Aristide turned the key in the lock and caught her round the waist, continuing in the same hot, greedy voice: 'Why don't you give me a little smile, Gherghina? Why do you look like that? That's not how I want you to look at me, oh no!'

He kissed her mouth, her eyes and her cheeks. Gherghina whispered: 'Why are you making fun of me, master?'

Then, sensing that she was being taken to the corner where she had seen the bed, she went on: 'No, I don't want to . . . I don't want to. I shall scream, really I will . . .'

'Don't be silly, Gherghina! No . . . no!' Aristide murmured, closing her mouth with his own.

The curtain fell amidst a storm of applause, and the lights came on suddenly in the stuffy atmosphere of the auditorium, filled with the odour of the crowd. For some minutes, the curtain-calls went on, then the audience calmed down, and the opera-glasses went to work. Nadina reigned in her box like an idol basking in the adoration of the faithful. She languidly eyed the occupants of the stalls below, and exchanged greetings with the inhabitants of other boxes. After a first casual inspection, she drawled to Grigore: 'Did you see? Even the Predeleanus are here, all of them . . .! I wonder what came over that mean thing, Victor, to spend so much money!'

'We haven't even called on them!' her husband regretfully said. 'I didn't know they had come back from the country.'

People started to file out, and the box was filled with ecstatic remarks: 'Oh, he was absolutely superb! . . . A great actor! . . . He played magnificently! . . . I saw the play in Paris, too. Yes, he was in it then . . .'

Grigore took advantage of the crowd to hurry off to the Predeleanu's box. After the first few words, Tecla remarked with amazement: 'You have changed completely! . . . It's as if you were a different person!'

'Can you actually see it?' Grigore asked. 'I'm a bit ashamed to admit it, but I can't help it. I'm madly in love!'

Olga cast him a saucy glance and a smile. Tecla gazed for a moment at Nadina's box, full of all sorts of admirers, and said thoughtfully: 'Yes, she looks more beautiful and charming than ever!'

Young Iuga kissed her hand gratefully.

When the curtain went up again in the darkened theatre, Nadina whispered to Grigore: 'Grig, where shall we go after the show?'

And later, at the culminating moment of the drama, she went on in the same sweet voice: 'Raul had discovered a new restaurant, quite Parisian and discreet; only the best people go there. I sent him to book a table, and told him to be here to take us. Was I right? Gogu's coming too, with his life's companion.'

'Everything you do is right!' Grigore responded, stealthily caressing her bare arm lying across the back of the seat.

It was a small night club, in a secluded street. The exterior was modest, but within was dazzling light, luxury, warmth, real French waiters, and several sensational attractions. Its owner was descended from a family of boyars with a distinguished name. He had wasted a huge fortune in Paris and with the remainder he had recently opened this establishment, just to have an occupation. He personally and ceremoniously received his guests, in the manner of a grand seigneur at a select reception. Raul Brumaru, who, as was to be expected, was a good friend of the host, made witty introductions, while Nadina, with a satisfied smile, repeated: '*Ah, oui, c'est vraiment très chic, très parisien!*'

The place was crowded with gentlemen in tails and ladies wearing décolleté dresses. Waiters rustled by like shadows, balancing loaded silver trays. A Spanish dancer twisted temperamentally to the harsh clicking of castanets in her special floor-space, accompanied by an orchestra of Spanish guitarists. After playing a selection of airs from Madrid and Sevilla, this orchestra followed the dancer off, making room for a pianist, who somnolently and casually introduced a French singer, an elegant spoilt darling, received with frenzied applause by his dotting public. After he had smiled gallantly to right and left, the lights were lowered, only a few blue bulbs remaining illuminated. He sang a reverie. Other songs followed, each accompanied by appropriate lighting. A waiter then handed the singer a guitar which one of the Spaniards had left on the corner of the piano, the lights changed to rose, and the spoilt young darling of the public came over to Nadina and, trembling with emotion, sang her a song of hopeless love.

The air was laden with smoke and a thick odour of heavy wine. Eyes sparkled, the white light trembled on weary faces. There was a vacant hum of voices.

In the cab, wrapped in furs, Nadina said gaily: 'It's high time Bucharest became a more civilized city, not all sausages, garlic and vulgarity! Don't you think so, Grig?'

'Certainly!'

'And that French singer, very interesting!' she added, after a pause. 'Did you see how he sang only for me?'

Grigore felt her next to him, warm and happy. Hungrily and humbly he said: 'You are the most beautiful creature!'

'Is that you, Petrică?'

'Yes, it's me; come on, open up, mother!'

He entered the cottage. It was dark inside, the only light was the red glow in the fireplace.

'I don't think you've even been to sleep!' he exclaimed.

'How could I? It took quite a long time to feed them, and get them to bed,' his mother mumbled by the fire. 'And you're on the late side yourself, my dear. It makes it hard for me, for there are so many of you, and I don't know how to divide the food so as to keep something for you and feed them, too. Oh Lord . . .'

Petre sat down on the bench and sighed.

'I don't stay away to go to parties or to have a good time, mother!'

Smaranda put a plate of soup out on the table for him. For a time the only sound was his hungry sipping and munching. On another bench, in a bed and on the stove, the children slept, breathing heavily. When he had taken the edge off his hunger he told his mother, between bites, that he still had not managed to get anywhere with the old boyar. The steward kept saying that it would be all right, that the boyar stuck to his promise, and that the steward himself had been told last winter to pay for the ox, but nothing had been said about his father's debt.

'That's what they kept telling me, too, and so weeks and months passed; soon it will be a year since your poor father died!' the woman sobbed chokingly.

'I won't let myself be treated that way, whatever happens!' said the young man with determination. 'I won't, because it's our right, we're not asking for charity; it was for them that Dad was working until the Lord called him!'

He scooped the last spoonfuls from the plate, and remained silent a long time, watching the flames flickering lazily in the hearth. Finally, he said in smothered tones: 'One suffers, and suffers, and sighs, until one can't any more, and then . . .'

He relapsed into silence, but then spoke again, thoughtfully: 'The men keep talking, and arguing, and wondering what to do. That's why I was so late.'

He paused as if something had suddenly struck him, and asked: 'Why haven't you lit the lamp? Isn't there any oil?'

'We've still got a bit, but I thought the fire would give enough light.'

Petre nodded heavily.

'You're right; after all, a fire gives a good enough light, if there isn't anything else.'

A flame flared up, brightening the embers and making Petre's face glow ruddily. His shadow moved on the wall, and the wall seemed to waver.

5

Titu Herdelea wrote home about all his experiences; at least he could tell them now that the Lord had helped him to settle down satisfactorily. He bragged a little in his letter, describing *Drapelul* as a very important paper. He sent a bundle of copies to old Herdelea, as he knew how much his father liked reading newspapers, carefully underlining in red ink the items he had written, especially the two editorials in which he vigorously opposed Count Apponyi himself. Of course, he also praised Grigore Iuga, who had such a wonderful elegant and beautiful wife that all the ladies in and around Amaradia would die of envy if they saw her. He told them what a time he had had at their country place, something like the baren's mansion in Becean, and how he had come to Bucharest by car, a distance as long as from Bistrița to Cluj. He sent his father greetings from Gavrilaş, who was like a parent to him, and his own regards to all his acquaintances, particularly the priest Belciug, who after all had been very nice to him in the end, so that small misunderstandings of the past might be forgotten. He added that he was waiting for the latter to come to Rumania, as he had promised while struggling to build up the new church in Pripaș. Being a widower, and quite well off, he could easily come, and would not regret spending the money, for Bucharest was nicer than Budapest, besides, it was a centre for all Rumanians. He sent heartfelt congratulations to Ghighi on her engagement, and hoped she would be happy with Zăgreanu, who was a very nice fellow. He was very sorry that he would not be able to attend her wedding, but for the present he had so many things he must see to, that he did not dare to neglect them, especially as he didn't have too much money yet.

He said nothing about his amorous affairs, however, although he knew that Ghighi in particular would have been most interested; he did not want the people in Amaradia to know that he was concerned in these frivolous things here, too. But in fact, since he had

disposed of his everyday worries, he had been quite busy with such matters.

Madame Mimi had kept her word, and had come to see her old room again one afternoon when she knew her mother would not be at home. She herself had removed her dress, flinging herself into the little bed which had once been hers. And afterwards, whenever she came, she did the same, but now she took off her petticoat as well, so that she was left as bare as when Mrs Alexandrescu had brought her into the world. She admired her body in the big, walnut-framed mirror, also a reminder of her maidenhood, and then quickly hid herself in the little bed, where she had known such sweet dreams.

At first Titu had received her with much emotion, proud that such a lovely woman should desire him. But soon he realized that he was not the only happy man enjoying her favours: what he received were just the left-overs, she was attracted to him merely because she liked the idea of being loved by a poet. And in fact Mimi herself had no hesitation in telling him that he must not feel he had any claim upon her, or bother her with jealousy, for she had quite enough of that sort of thing with her husband.

Naturally the young man accepted the situation. He told himself that after all, she gave him all she could, and why should he refuse such a delightful creature, especially as it cost him nothing?

Nevertheless, certain inevitable complications arose. His pupil, Marioara, sensed something, and began to accuse him. She was no street-girl, she said, and if he did not love her truly, why did he not say so, instead of being unfaithful to her with all sorts of women? She concluded by hinting that she would complain to Mrs Gavrilas about his disloyal behaviour. He had to spend a whole evening swearing that he loved her alone before he could calm her down.

In addition, one day, coming face to face with Mrs Alexandrescu, he was told by that lady in a sad, meaningful voice, as if she had been deserted by Jenică: 'Mr Titu, I do beg you, be careful not to ruin Mimi! She may love you, it's true; I noticed from the beginning that she had taken to you, but you must be more careful, and look after her, because if Vasile got wind of it, it would be a calamity. I don't reproach you, I know how passion comes, burning you up, and Mimi is such a darling; no wonder she is bored with a dismal peasant like him, but . . .'

Titu listened to his landlady's lamentations with resignation, merely muttering a protest at the end, more to show that he was a gentleman than expecting to be believed. As a matter of fact, he felt somewhat awkward with Mrs Alexandrescu because of Tanța, whom he had started wooing with great persistence. Some time ago his landlady had taken him to meet the girl's parents, praising him

to them, after which he had become a regular visitor to the house, which was behind the station, and belonged to her father, Mr Alexandru Ionescu, who was the head of an office at the Ministry of Finance. At the moment, Tanța was Titu's beautiful, true love. Through her he had regained his poetic inspiration. Every evening, after he had finished his work for *Drapelul*, he glorified the divine creature in verse, wrapped the while in a haze of cigarette smoke. It seemed that she responded to his emotion. Although she was shy, she had confessed that she could live without him no longer, and if she did not see him for three days running she always found some excuse to call on Lenuța, who was her confidante, and who of course called him in.

All this, far from preventing him from fulfilling his duties at work, actually stimulated him. He conscientiously presented himself every morning at *Drapelul* with his manuscript all prepared, and always found Roșu alone, seated at his writing desk, as if he had never stirred from it. Towards noon reporters and sub-editors began to appear, invariably in a hurry, agitated, dissatisfied, and engaged in heated discussion, but never going so far as to do any writing. As a matter of fact, Herdelea was Roșu's only journalistic colleague, and the latter frequently said to him: 'I think you will get on, my dear young fellow. Just listen to what I say, I don't talk nonsense like these pretty gentlemen, who come in wearing their hats just to make a sensation, who tell lies and who can't write a decent line. You'll get on, my boy, because you like work and are not afraid of it. Just mind what I say. And you've got talent and industry - exactly what a good journalist must have. But, mind you, you might still give it up one day, for you're an honest, straightforward chap, and it's very hard to elbow one's way through in journalism if one is like that. Still, wherever fate may land you, you'll do your job properly. Just listen to what I say.'

Titu felt himself obliged to report whenever he had meals with Gogu Ionescu, or was invited by Grigore, and other such social events. The secretary did not approve of these goings on, considering them social climbing. He declared dogmatically that a newspaperman must stay in this world, not thrust himself into that of the gentry, and thus lull his conscience. A journalist must preserve his faculty to protest and chastise, especially in Rumania, where abuse was the only perfectly valid law.

'Open your eyes, my dear boy, and look around you! You went round the country in a car, and stayed in boyars' houses; you did not put your ear to the ground to listen to the voices that are stifled. You won't see or hear anything from a car, or on the pavements in Bucharest. The appearance of luxury and civilization which you see is false and artificial. Reality is quite different, young

man! We export tens of thousands of wagon-loads of cereals, yet several million peasants have no maize for their daily porridge. Do you grasp the significance of what I'm saying? We just deceive ourselves with the lights of Bucharest, we don't look beyond, because we know that there lies an abyss, and if we look into it we shudder! No luxury, no cars, no villas, there, my dear boy! Those are just the crust covering a volcano of misery. Tomorrow the crust may burst, and then . . . !'

Titu became used to these prophecies of catastrophe. There was no man who did not shed a tear and make horrible predictions as soon as the present situation and the suffering of the peasants came into the conversation. Probably it had always been the same, and always would be. Townspeople, who knew the country from pleasant trips, developed a great fondness for the peasants and their continual desire to revolt, precisely because they felt confident that the Rumanian peasant would never be able to revolt.

6

'Grig, what about spending Christmas in the country?' Nadina enthusiastically enquired one day, as the season drew near.

Grigore answered with a deeply grateful look. He felt the proposal was made in a really thoughtful spirit. Nothing could have pleased him more than this proof of her drawing nearer to him. Thus their love was cementing itself by a mutual understanding. Physical passion becomes lasting when it feeds on the inexhaustible essence of the spirit. If he had behaved this way with her right from the beginning, how many miseries he could have spared them both. Clearly, one could not find happiness unless one was first purified by sorrow.

The details were easily settled. Grigore was content simply to listen to her and see that her desires were fulfilled to the last letter. The first thing was that they should spend Christmas at Amara, but that they must be in the capital for the New Year. This was agreed. Secondly, it must be a jolly Christmas, with lots of people, and good musicians. Agreed, of course. They must invite all their more sophisticated neighbours. The old man would see to that, he would be pleasantly surprised with their decision, and would invite the county prefect from Pitești, so that the government should be represented at the festivities. Nadina smiled, the idea of the prefect being present was amusing. Grigore asked: 'Shall we take anybody from Bucharest, or better not?'

'But of course we must!' Nadina exclaimed, surprised. 'If we invite only landlords and lease-holders, and the prefect, we shall

fill the place with boredom! First of all we must remember Gogu and Eugenia, they have her brother's family with them; he's a teacher or something like that in Giurgiu. Naturally they will come with their guests. And we must have some nice witty young man, so that there will be someone to talk to - two or three at least.' When she came to Brumaru's name, she observed, or thought she did, a shadow passing over her husband's face, and added hastily: 'Well, if you don't want him, I can drop him out, Grig! I only thought of Raul because he is always gay and . . .'

'Why no, it's perfectly all right! Poor Raul!' Grigore answered, with contemptuous pity.

'And look, that young man from Transylvania, what's his name, can come, too!' Nadina went on. 'We'll ask him to sing some Transylvanian carols.'

Christmas fell on a Thursday. Nadina decided that they would all leave for Amara on Tuesday afternoon, so as to have an undisturbed night's sleep there and be rested on Christmas Eve. When the time came, only Raul was waiting for them at the Gara de Nord. The other entertaining gentlemen had excused themselves at the last moment. Titu appeared only after Chitila, radiant and lively. He said, quite untruthfully, that he had arrived at the station just as the train had started, and had found a place in a different compartment. In fact, he had come half-an-hour early to make sure he found a decent seat in a third-class carriage, for he was travelling on his own money, and why should he throw it about?

Grigore alone paid any attention to his excuses and explanations. Nadina smiled at him indifferently, being engrossed in a *risqué* story from *La Vie Parisienne*, that Brumaru was telling her. The latter interrupted himself for a moment casually to offer Titu his left hand and said: 'How do you do, *mon cher*?' Young Herdelea continued talking for a while to Grigore about political matters. He was told that Gogu Ionescu had gone to Lespezi three days ago, and that there would be an opportunity to meet Alexandru Pintea, which pleased him; he had met the latter already at Singeorz. He then found a pretext to withdraw to his compartment, fearing lest the ticket-inspector should find him there and make him look ridiculous, being in a first-class carriage with a third-class ticket.

The snow they had left in Bucharest was nothing to what they found in Amara. Sledges were waiting for them at Costești, and Nadina jumped for joy. As soon as they arrived, she ordered a trip by sleigh around the district the following day. Grigore rose early to make arrangements for the drive, but he was greeted with unpleasant news. When old Ichim, their best man with the horses, had unharnessed the mares from the good sledge and foddered and watered them, he had taken them to be haltered in the stables,

when suddenly one mare had shied and come down on the old man's back, injuring him, so that he had to be carried off in a horse blanket. It would be impossible for him to drive on the trip, and none of the other men would dare to handle the two spirited mares.

Grigore was sorry because of Ichim, but especially as Nadina loved speed, and would not be satisfied if she were drawn by two ordinary horses. Then Bumbu, the steward, suggested that Smaranda's Petre be called, as he, after all, had been a corporal in the artillery, handling all sorts of horses; for him these mares would be just a plaything. He was hurriedly fetched.

Nevertheless, they were only able to start at noon. Nadina took Titu next to her, placing Raul in the other sledge with Grigore, who mentally bestowed a kiss on her for her gesture. He gave instructions that her sledge should go in front, through Ruginoasa, Birlogu, Babaroaga, Gliganu, Lespezi and home again. Wrapped in furs, like mediaeval cloaks, and covered with thick, fleecy rugs, they could laugh at the intense cold which had lasted for over a week. As they left Amara, a great white plain spread before their eyes, like an endless ermine mantle, dazzling in the bright sunlight. The highroad cut a straight and gleaming line over which the sledges skidded in a breathtaking fashion. Petre, standing and bending slightly forward, urged on the mares from time to time with an energetic click of his tongue. In his grey peasant's coat, with his black lambskin *căciula* over one ear, he seemed even taller and more powerful than he actually was. •

Nadina chattered on and on, brimming with high spirits. Now she would make a remark to Titu, now she would cry out weirdly, now she would sing, and imitate the gallop of the horses. From time to time she called to the driver encouragingly: 'Come on, then, don't hold back!'

'I won't, madam, don't worry,' he muttered, without turning round, and in a slightly ironical voice.

They rushed on thus for an hour, passing through Ruginoasa, Birlogu, Babaroaga and Gliganu. As they advanced briskly towards Lespezi, a large flock of crows was seen in the distance, several hundred of them spread across the road like an ink blot on a vast sheet of white paper. Bold with hunger, the birds moved only when the sledge was almost upon them, with a great flapping of wings and cawing. The mare in front, in a spasm of fright, jumped to the right to avoid the menace. At the same moment Petre applied the whip to her belly. The pain frightened her still more, and she burst straight ahead on the even road, her furious galloping in turn frightening her companion.

'What are you doing? What are you doing?' Nadina screamed. 'She'll kill us . . . Help!'

She clung desperately to Titu's neck, while the horses, whinnying and pricking their ears, rushed madly on, touching the rounded front of the sledge with their hooves. Petre's voice was heard reassuringly: 'Don't be frightened, madam; you needn't worry as long as you're in my hands!'

The strange, rough voice suddenly dispersed her fears. Now she heard Titu, too, who had not lost his composure, saying: 'It's all right, madam, it's all right!'

She tried to smile, as if ashamed of her terror. Petre, still slightly bent, but as stiff as a post, pulled on the reins, repeating calmly but firmly: 'Steady there, now, steady there!'

As Nadina watched him, it seemed that she could see his very muscles flexing like steel, and his strength increasing as he threw his weight on to his down-thrust legs. She regained her composure completely, and arrived at Amara as gay as ever. Getting out of the sledge, she laughingly recounted the story, crying: 'Well - I was quite terrified . . . A good job we had such a strong driver!'

Petre turned towards her a face ruddy with the cold, his breath frozen on his moustache in little icicles, his small, lively eyes sparkling with joy, and remarked: 'Well, madam, being boyar's mares, they're spirited; it's all food and leisure with them, they get no work at all. No wonder they go crazy sometimes!'

He spat triumphantly between the rounded cruppers of the exhausted mares.

'That was good work, Petre; bravo!' shouted Titu, at last succeeding in disentangling himself from all his furs and leaping down to put a friendly arm around the driver's shoulders.

Nadina recounted the incident at lunch, embroidering it somewhat with little details which Titu confirmed like the gentleman he was. The little details grew more and more, and the whole thing became quite an adventure, with Nadina the heroine, as she told the tale again and again to each newly-arrived guest that evening. The more concern she saw in the eyes of her listeners, the bolder she grew, laughing and declaring nonchalantly that she adored violent, shaking experiences, and was glad that she had met death face to face: 'You almost lost me, Grig, dear . . . Would you have been sorry?' she asked him kittenishly. As he answered, he caressed her as if she were an innocent child.

'This means that you will have to be more prudent about your pleasures, and not let yourself be tempted!'

'A careful pleasure is not a pleasure any more!' she pouted.

Miron Iuga received his guests with a bonhomie which suited him well. He had not invited Platamonu, although Grigore felt that this would have been the right thing to do, after all, the man was the lease-holder for both Gogu and Nadina; nor did he invite

Cosma Buruiană, whom he had still not forgiven for his lie about the theft, despite the fact that Buruiană had done his best to atone, even going so far as to give a sack of maize to every peasant who had been questioned and beaten up.

The last guests, arriving at seven in the evening from Pitești, were prefect Andrei Boerescu and General Dardalat, with their wives. They were going on to their own estates from here, the prefect to Rociu and the General to Humele, to spend the rest of the holidays there. Boerescu was a little, rotund old man, about Miron's age, and full of life and vigour. He had once studied medicine, and actually had a small plate to that effect affixed to the wall of his house in Pitești, but he never practised, as any kind of suffering or disease was repulsive to him. His wife resembled him like a sister, both in her looks and her temperament. General Dardalat, although he had a heart as soft as butter, looked as ferocious as a pirate, an impression emphasized by his black, dyed moustache, with its sharply twisted ends, which contrasted strangely with the sparse, grizzled hair on his head. His wife, stout and tall like her husband, was much younger than he, and still flirtatious. The great hall seemed hardly big enough to hold them all. The prefect, remembering his position, put on a grave air at first, but this very quickly disappeared, for he was not going to spoil his appetite. When he discovered that Titu Herdelea was a journalist in Bucharest, and on the government newspaper, too, he got him into a corner and cross-examined him in detail on the political situation, declaring that in his county everything ran smoothly, and he himself was popular and loved by all.

Nadina's adventure remained the centre of attention, for it was a subject on which everybody was fully competent to comment. Even Ioniță Rotompan, a rather reserved, morose individual, who had lived alone on the Goia estate since his daughter had married, asked his hostess several questions about it, and repeatedly nodded indulgently. Ștefănescu, the retired colonel, who was lease-holder of the Vlăduța estate, had brought all his three daughters, equally nice young women, in the hope that Nadina, with her connections among the right people, had invited some serious young men from Bucharest. Nadina, true enough, embraced them charmingly, and then handed them over to Raul, giving him orders to be nice to them; a task which he performed to the best of his ability, casting her furtive, desperate looks from time to time. Captain Lache Grădinaru, who regarded himself as irresistible because with his little sword alone he had won the Cantacuzo estate, with over three thousand pogons, and his plain, stupid wife into the bargain, kept zealously clicking his spurs around Nadina, underlining his efforts with an occasional sigh, turning his eyes to the heavens. In order

to rid herself of him, Nadina was compelled to withdraw for a moment with Titu Herdelea.

'What an idiot that captain is, really!' she said, bored.

Titu saw himself as a fellow-sufferer and her accomplice. Now that he was face to face with her, she seemed more beautiful than ever, with her deep décolleté, bare arms and a peculiar radiance on her enigmatic features. Titu whispered to her with smothered emotion: 'I, too, profited from today's adventure. You clasped your arms round my neck as warmly as if . . .'

'And you see, I did not even realise I did it!' she said smiling. 'I'm sure you understand that I did not intend . . .'

'Unfortunately, I do!' young Herdelea sighed.

At the moment when everyone was preparing to seat themselves at the dining-room table, a carol was heard outside. All listened with pleasure. Two others followed; it was the mixed choir of young people which Dragoş the teacher had laboured to organize as a surprise for old Iuga, who, in fact, was very pleased. He gave orders that they should all be given something to eat and drink, congratulated Dragoş, and made him stay for dinner.

Naturally, the meal continued practically until midnight, washed down with all sorts of wines and entertained by the music of the famous Fănică from Pitești. There was the inevitable toast from the prefect, and Colonel Ștefănescu felt himself obliged to follow, complimenting Nadina and all the other ladies present. Then Nadina wanted to dance, and others joined in, but the meal continued. The glass partition into the hall was folded back, the musicians stepped into the centre, and everybody was satisfied; those who remained at table, and the dancers, who could tire themselves out to their heart's delight in the other room.

Nadina even persuaded old Miron to dance an old-fashioned waltz with her. However, it was Raul who took the lead in the dancing, and just to please Nadina, he danced with all the ladies. The only one who refused him was the prefect's wife, who amiably excused herself, saying that she had passed the age when a woman could display her charms. And in spite of Gogu Ionescu's fifty years, he provided Raul with serious competition, though it was true he danced mostly with Eugenia, and generally for her sake. Nor did Titu Herdelea allow himself to remain in the shade, or forgo the pleasure of dancing with Nadina, to whom he said sentimentally during a slow boston: 'This is fate's revenge for this morning!' and he squeezed her round the waist. To which Nadina answered casually: 'Be careful, you'll be getting like the captain!'

Titu felt as if he had received a douche of cold water. He was ashamed of his lack of polish, and withdrew, seating himself modestly

next to Dragoş, but continuing to watch Nadina for a time. She was now partnered by Raul Brumaru.

'At least, I hope you've noticed my sacrifices!' said the latter when they had reached a distant corner.

Without looking in his face, Nadina pressed herself against him in answer.

'I'm desperate . . . I can't go on any longer! Why do you torture me like this?' he went on, crushing her against him and allowing his arm to slide caressingly down her back.

'Be patient!' Nadina murmured. 'Don't hold me like that; people might notice . . .'

'But you did promise solemnly, Nada, didn't you?' he persisted. 'I'll be waiting for you, Nada, do you hear? Will you come? Say you will, please . . . Nada . . .'

'Yes, yes! Hush, be quiet!' she whispered, clutching his arm with her left hand, for at the moment she heard the captain's voice very near, accompanied by a storm of spur-clicking: 'Madam, you must have pity on us, too . . .'

Nadina left Brumaru, and passed on to the captain's arms, warbling: 'Yes, this gentleman is right! You must wait, Raul! You must be content with the end!'

Captain Grădinaru, delighted, swept her away triumphantly.

Titu observed Raul, deserted, standing in the middle of the hall, his eyes still fixed on the disappearing couple, and smiled with inward satisfaction, imagining that she must have snubbed Brumaru in a similar manner and saying to himself admiringly: 'What a wonderful woman!'

Around him at the table a heated discussion was proceeding. Prefect Boerescu had started it by praising the government, thus arousing increasingly warm criticisms from Colonel Ştefănescu, who did not hesitate to declare: 'We shall inevitably move towards disaster if anarchy continues to be tolerated.' He had no political views, and did not care what party was in power, but he expected a government to be energetic, to know what it wanted, and keep order and discipline, otherwise the country would go bankrupt.

'All right, all right, Colonel, you alone see anarchy, because you belong to the opposition,' said the prefect in a superior manner. 'It's pointless to say you have no political views. Didn't you vote for the other crowd two years ago? Well then . . .'

'Sir, I vote according to the dictates of my conscience, as an honest citizen!' cried the colonel angrily. 'I haven't joined any party, neither theirs nor yours, precisely to preserve my freedom of judgment!'

'Don't get so angry, Colonel!' Boerescu went on mildly. 'I don't blame you for having voted as you wanted to; but I can't allow you to belittle us unfairly, that's all!'

Then, without waiting for the colonel to regain his breath, he suddenly addressed himself, as if by a fortunate inspiration, to Dragoş the teacher, who had said nothing up till then.

'Listen, Mr . . . What was your name, I have forgotten . . . Mr teacher!'

'Dragoş!' the teacher supplied.

'Oh, yes, Dragoş . . . You tell us, you live among the peasants, and you belong to the people. Tell us frankly, don't hesitate: is there quiet and order in these parts, or is it as this gentleman says? Please enlighten us!'

After a slight hesitation the teacher answered, looking straight into the prefect's eyes: 'There is peace and quiet, but great poverty, too!'

Boerescu frowned slightly: 'Poverty, yes, of course. But poverty does not come within the province of the government. It depends on the circumstances and the people. The government must keep the scales balanced, that's all!'

Dragoş continued, in a more lively tone, to justify himself: 'Of course, but, you see, it is only Christmas, yet the great majority of the people have no maize left at all. It's terrible! Think – what will these wretched people do until next autumn? They are compelled to beg, no less. Take what happened today, at Mr Iuga's place, such misery . . . Dozens of men and women were begging, just for maize; making debts they will never be able to pay. And what happens here is repeated everywhere, if it isn't worse.'

Regaining his confidence, Colonel Ştefănescu interrupted, addressing the prefect.

'In fact, it's just as I said my dear Mr Prefect! Precisely! The people do not have enough, they murmur, agitate and threaten. For God's sake, gentlemen, isn't that anarchy? And it was a pretty good year, too, everything was propitious. Imagine what would happen if the Lord sent a drought, or some other calamity! I believe the peasants would storm the barns of the boyars, without more ado, if not worse!'

Boerescu felt himself at a loss, especially because of Titu's presence, for he might noise abroad in Bucharest what he had heard in the prefect's county and make out that Boerescu was a weak administrator. He sought for a crushing reply, but could not find one, and became irritated. Meanwhile, Miron Iuga put in quietly: 'All this is the result of the thoughtless demagogy in the towns. That's the source of the evil which breeds dissatisfaction among the peasants and a spirit of disorderliness. When people who are supposed to be responsible assert that the peasant cannot live because he has no land, naturally the peasant asks for land, and does not respect his obligations. That's the source of the trouble.'

'Boyar Miron, you've expressed my very feelings!' cried the Colonel. 'The peasant sits in the inn and drinks his work away, and then he complains that he hasn't got enough.'

The teacher could not refrain from adding: 'It's true that there are many drunkards, but . . .'

The Colonel, however, would not let him finish, and continued: 'They are a stubborn, greedy lot, sir! That's why an iron hand is needed to put sense into them. Otherwise . . .'

The prefect interrupted him mockingly, as if he had now found his decisive reply: 'Colonel, you want a government which will nurse the peasants, don't you? Bless you, why didn't you say so? You see, Mr Herdelea, what this gentleman asks from the government. Do write about it in *Drapelul*, so that the leaders will hear about it, too; how much they expect from us, who represent the government!'

Titu Herdelea gave a smile of comprehension, and the prefect winked at him.

At this point, however, Mrs Pintea gave the sign that it was time to go, and the prefect's wife agreed with her. In vain Grigore and Miron protested; in a few minutes all the guests, discovering to their horror that it was almost four in the morning, rose to depart. Now, however, a serious problem was raised by Mrs Pintea herself: what should she do about her three children, whom she had put to bed immediately after dinner, and who were now sleeping like logs? It would be a shame to wake them, and she feared they might catch cold if they went all warm as they were into the freezing cold outside. Everybody joined in the discussion, making various suggestions. Grigore decided that the Pinteas should sleep there, and go back to Lespezi next morning, to stay as long as they liked. There was a pleasant room at their disposal, right next to that of the children, which was in turn next to Nadina's room, so they would feel quite at home.

After the guests had dispersed one by one, and old Miron Iuga had withdrawn to the old manor, those who were left went upstairs, and before retiring, chatted for a while on the big landing. The two Pinteas peeped in on their children with the necessary caution before going to their own room. Herdelea and Brumar, who had adjoining rooms, which lay beyond the big opening over the veranda where a blue window stood above the main entrance, also made their way to bed. As the light of the full moon shone through the blue glass, Titu paused for a moment in the middle of the landing, turned towards Nadina and Grigore, and said with the melancholy befitting to a poet: 'What a divine night!'

Nadina opened the door of her room. In the faint glimmer of the lamp burning before the icon, the big bed could be seen, white

and warm, with her portrait above. Grigore quietly asked: 'Are you happy, my love?'

'I've really had a very, very nice time!' she murmured, and, after a short silence, hardly able to overcome her languor, added: 'And now I'm so tired that . . .'

Grigore looked at her, sympathizing with her obvious exhaustion, and whispered gently: 'You've danced too much, but it doesn't matter. I'm glad you're happy. Well, I'll leave you now, darling. Good-night!'

He took her in his arms, kissing her burning lips. Gently releasing herself from his embrace, she said smilingly: 'It's very sweet of you not to . . . good-night, Grig darling!'

Her husband stood for a while in front of her door after it had closed upon her. From below he heard the whispers and foot-steps of the servants tidying up a little before they themselves went to bed. He put out the light, so that only the blue moonlight was left to mingle with the blackness of the night. The small, narrow corridor which led to the room in which he habitually slept was only too familiar to him. His room lay more to the back, with a window opening on to the old manor.

He undressed and threw himself into bed. But sleep would not come. His heart was full of restless joy; it was long since he had desired Nadina as he desired her tonight, yet in spite of this he had come here all alone. If he had insisted . . . Yet it was better like this, otherwise what difference would there be between his love and that of a brute, who knew only a fulfilment of appetite, by whatever means? His thoughts madly rushed to and fro, making plans, destroying them, and raising new hopes. More than an hour passed, and there was no sign of the approach of sleep. Perhaps the room was too warm. He got up, put on his dressing-gown, and lit a cigarette. He must refresh himself a little. The darkness was even deeper now. On the landing the rays of the moon played languidly. Feeling his way, he reached the recess over the veranda, where several armchairs and small tables were placed, felt for a chair, and seated himself cautiously, as he had come, as if afraid to trouble the dreams of the others round him. He sat with his back to the wall which separated him from his love. Obliquely in front of him, through the blue glass, he saw the huge, fearful curious face of the moon. The tranquillity, even greater here than in his room, and the coolness surrounding him, soothed him, and calmed his beating heart. He leaned his head on the chairback, and closed his eyes, murmuring to himself in amusement: 'It would be odd if I fell asleep here!' Now and then he drew on his cigarette, making a glow of rosy light.

Suddenly he seemed to hear a door open and close almost soundlessly. He listened for a while, and then, unable to control his

curiosity, rose abruptly to his feet. His chair thudded dully against the wall. First he looked to his left, towards Nadina's chamber, and then to the right. On the wall, between Herdelea's room and that of Brumar, a grey shadow seemed to tremble in the pitch darkness. Grigore approached, wondering. The shadow shrank closely against the wall, its arms pressed outward. He caught her by the bare shoulder, recognizing her at the same moment: 'Oh, it's you . . . I thought it was a servant . . .'

He could feel the soft, cool, slightly moist skin of her shoulder, and tore away his hand as if he were touching the skin of a reptile. Overcome with disgust, he spat out: 'Strumpet!'

Turning his back on her, he began to make his way through the thick darkness towards the back of the house, hurrying as if a freezing wave threatened to seize his heart.

Next day, Raul Brumar, rising earlier than the rest, gaily descended, humming a fashionable new air which had been very successful in Paris. Downstairs he met Grigore.

'Oh, Grig, you've beaten me to it, *mon cher*. I thought I would be the first up!' he cried, approaching his host with his hand extended.

Ignoring the hand, Grigore answered in a dull voice: 'Go back to Bucharest at once! The sledge is at the entrance.'

Brumar's face turned a dirty white. Amazed, he muttered a few disconnected phrases. Grigore repeated: 'You have a quarter of an hour!'

After fifteen minutes Raul Brumar was dressed.

Petre, who was doing Ichim's work, raised the whip. As they started off, Grigore called from the top of the steps: 'Be careful with the mares, Petre!'

Chapter Five

FEVER

I

Next day, everybody expressed their regret at the sudden departure of Brumaru, who had been such a good-natured fellow. Nevertheless, his absence did not prevent the jollities from continuing, to such an extent that Mrs Pintea, observing that her husband was deeply engaged in conversation with Miron Iuga and Titu Herdelea, was forced to intervene quite energetically: 'Come along, we must go, Alexandru, dear. Otherwise another night will catch up with us!'

Nadina accompanied them as far as Lespezi so as to get some fresh air and loosen up her limbs. She returned late, just in time for lunch.

According to the programme they had drawn up, all were to spend the second day of Christmas at Gogu's place. Old Iuga stayed behind alone; he was not going to change his habits and leave home on a holiday. Now, however, Grigore also announced that he could not go, as he had to rush off to Pitești, where urgent and important business called him.

Titu rejoiced in the fact that he was to accompany Nadina alone, although she seemed a little out of sorts. At Lespezi, where they stayed for dinner, she complained about her husband, saying that at every turn of their married life her natural sensitivity was wounded. Towards the evening she became more animated, and on the way home was sweet and happy, chattering gaily all the time, laughing at Titu's jokes, stopping the sledge to admire the moon, and crooning French melodies in a voice frosted with cold.

Actually, Nadina felt herself in an awkward position with Grigore, and did not know what attitude to adopt; the others did not notice anything, but, in fact, he did not address a word to her, nor did he demand an explanation. She suspected that he had followed Brumaru and challenged him to a duel. Such an event would inevitably end in a divorce, and even if it had been averted, Grigore might have found another, less romantic solution. Precisely because of this, she had spoken about her marriage, at her brother's place in a tone which would prepare the way for any eventuality.

On the third day of Christmas, as Nadina returned from a walk, she encountered a group of peasants in the courtyard. She felt irritated and flushed. Among them was Petre, who had been brought along because it was thought that he would be listened to with more good will, as he had driven her sledge. But hardly had the young man uttered three words before Nadina interrupted him brusquely: 'Has it come to having my way barred now? Haven't I told you that I'm not selling? Why don't you leave me in peace? I came here for some peace, not . . .'

She passed on and went up the steps angrily: 'I've never met such impertinence!'

Young Herdelea followed her nervously, shaking his head. He had never thought her capable of such an energetic outburst.

The peasants remained where they stood, looking at one another in confusion. After a considerable silence, Marin Ștan, adjusting his *căciulă*, said jokingly: 'What a devil of a woman!'

Petre, however, muttered dully: 'You wait, my lady, the two of us will meet another day!'

In the afternoon at Dragoș's place Titu had to listen once more to the woes of the village.

At the same moment Miron Iuga was having a solemn discussion with Nadina – naturally about Babaroaga.

On Sunday, the fourth day, towards evening, Grigore returned at last. He apologized for his long absence, and seemed happy, as if everything were going well. Before dinner he told Nadina that he wanted to have a word with her. Noticing the regret in his voice and expression, she enquired with an alluring smile: 'Would you like us to go upstairs to my room?'

'No, no!' her husband protested, becoming suddenly withdrawn, as one who sees a danger before him.

They retired into a small room, and Grigore announced quietly and simply: 'This is what I have decided!'

To-morrow, Monday, by the fast afternoon train, which would give her time to prepare, she was to go to Bucharest. There she must immediately get in touch with a lawyer and draw up a petition for divorce. The grounds were to be desertion on his part. Of course he had not been to Pitești, where he could not possibly have arranged anything during the holidays, but to Bucharest, in order to move all his personal belongings to the house of his Aunt Mariuca, General Constantinescu's widow. He was making the gesture, hard though it was, to avoid a scandal, but only on condition that she did not procrastinate as to the divorce, in which case he would not guarantee to remain so passive. Young Herdelea would accompany her, so that she should not travel alone. He had already bought the tickets, in Costești, so all they had to do was to get into the train.

At first Nadina had been intrigued, then she listened calmly, but with a slight, ironical quirk at the corners of her mouth.

'Very well!' she said when he had finished, and went out, he closely behind her.

At the table she announced that she was bored, and would be leaving the next day. Miron tried to make her change her mind, but in vain. She would leave Grig behind, however, if Mr Herdelea would like to accompany her. Titu naturally received this suggestion with enthusiasm, both because of her company and because he would be saving his fare.

The parting took place in the big hall. Outside it was bitterly cold. Nadina, gloved and swathed in furs, stretched out her hand naturally: 'Goodbye, Grig!'

'Adieu!' he whispered, almost soundlessly, barely touching her hand, as if he were afraid.

Old Iuga saw her to the door, which stood open for a while, letting in a wave of cold, refreshing air.

'What a lovely, charming little woman!' the old man murmured, rubbing his hands. 'It really is a shame to let her go so soon, Grigoriță!'

On hearing about the divorce, he rapidly crossed himself. 'Impossible! Sheer insanity!' Grigore's explanations were in vain, especially as he did not disclose the decisive reason. The old man would not hear of it. Although he did not say so, he was thinking that if his son divorced he would lose every hope of receiving preferential treatment in case Nadina sold the Babaroaga estate.

'I think she's cleverer than you are, and will not sue for divorce!' said Miron Iuga.

'Then it will be more unpleasant for her!' Grigore replied.

2

The intense cold had persisted now since four weeks before Christmas and there was still no sign of a change. The village seemed buried up to the waist in snow. One dared not let the fire go out in the hearth for one moment. Boyar Miron did take some pity on the suffering of the people, and allowed them to take dead branches from his woods without charging it, or noting it in the books. But winter dragged on, and the dead branches grew fewer. Some people began to burn their fencing, others felled the trees in their gardens.

The next Sunday the village hall was full. Praviță, the mayor, who had arrived early, patiently waited for everyone to assemble. He had told no one what he had been ordered to say. Only when

he saw that the entrance itself was crammed with people, and there was no more room in the office, did he start to speak, the slight tremor in his voice being due to the half pint of plum-brandy he had swallowed at Busuioc's on his way to buck him up. After declaring that he was a lenient man, behaving like a Christian in his dealings with the people, and turning a blind eye to many misdeeds, he complained that nevertheless Amara was well on the way to becoming a village of thieves, for from Christmas onwards not a night had passed without a theft. People had stolen from the leaseholder, Cosma Buruiană, like gypsies, and he was in danger of being left without any maize for sowing.

'Well, we suffered enough last autumn through him!' grumbled Serafim Mogoș, loud enough for all to hear.

The mayor acknowledged this as true, but added on behalf of the lease-holder that he had compensated them for it since, although he had not been obliged to. At this, Leonte Orbișor shouted from the entrance: 'Yes, but you can't make up for the beating we had, Mr Mayor!'

Nevertheless, Cosma Buruiană had not complained, lest the great boyar should hear of it, and start more trouble. For a week or so now, evildoers had been hanging around boyar Miron's manor, too. Well, from the boyar it didn't matter so much; sneaking something from the boyar, after all, isn't a sin, people say, because it is one's own labour. But things had been stolen from villagers, too, somebody's hen, and somebody else's maize: to say nothing of Father Nicodim - everybody in the village had heard how the pork from his two pigs, which he killed for Christmas, had been stolen. His son-in-law Filip Ilieasa, was there and he could vouch for it! Here the mayor paused to give the son-in-law time to answer. Filip, heavy and dull, fidgeted, coughed, and nodded his head, preparing all the more forcibly to denounce those sinners who had stolen from one who served the church. But before he had opened his mouth Ignat Cercel remarked: 'People steal where there is something to steal - what could they take from the likes of me, poverty?'

There was some laughter at this, especially in the entrance, but even from those within the room. The mayor grew irritated.

'We've no time for jokes, Ignat; I didn't call you here for that!'

'I'm not joking, Mr Mayor,' the peasant retorted, resuming a humbler tone. 'The tax-collector has taken my pig away, and we haven't got any maize, nor any wood. My children are screaming with hunger and cold . . .'

'We can't go on like this, can we!' Leonte Orbișor shouted suddenly, as if encouraged. 'We can't go through this winter. We'll either die, or else . . .'

'That's it, that's right,' confirmed several voices at the entrance. 'We're slowly dying!'

Then a shrill voice cut through the general murmur: 'This is the third day nothing has passed between my lips; it's a miracle I can still stand on my legs, cross myself if it isn't!'

The mayor, in order to regain his authority, shouted angrily: 'Hey, hey . . . that's enough!' As the noise died down somewhat, he went on more mildly: 'There's poverty enough, we can all see it, and starvation, plenty of it, but does that mean you can come tomorrow and take me by the throat because you're hungry? Does it?'

'Well, yes!' the shrill voice was heard again, in a tone which could have meant anything.

It was Melinte Heruvimu; tall, hollow-checked and jaundiced-looking. His dark eyes blazed with despair. He had three children at home and a wife who had been bedridden since autumn, neither alive nor dead.

Pravilă took this answer to mean that Heruvimu agreed with him, and resumed from where he had left off in confusion, declaring that from now on he washed his hands of the whole matter, and would pass any complaints to the police, to let them investigate the thefts and restore order in the village. Here Serafim Mogoş grumbled once more, as if a thorn rankled in his heart: 'Huh! Police! They're just there to sneer, and torture people for nothing.'

'But people must behave, too, Serafim!' retorted the mayor energetically. 'As a matter of fact,' he added, turning to the rest, 'that's all I have to say. You should speak up too, and say what's on your minds. I don't want anybody to say afterwards that he didn't know, or that I wasn't fair!'

Several people all started to speak at once, each on a different subject. Petre Petre, who stood next to Nicolae Dragoş, ordered: 'Wait! Let everyone speak in turn, so that we can understand each other like human beings!'

Luca Talabà spoke up at once, but not on any matter connected with the mayor's troubles. He immediately began to talk about Babaroaga, a subject which robbed him of his sleep. Winter, however severe, would pass like a shadow, soon spring would begin, and with it, work on the land.

'Well, then, what are we going to do? Just stand by with folded arms while the Greek snatches it from us? The lady's making fun of us: she even tells us off when we're straight with her. If we just sit twiddling our thumbs, we can't complain about poverty, it'll eat away our heads.'

Petre felt he must tell them something which complicated matters; the lady was going to divorce Master Grigoriţă. Irina's

Marioara, niece to the cook at the manor, had told him. So God only knew when she would be coming to these parts again or when they would get a chance of talking to her.

This news threw them into even greater confusion. The hubbub sounded like the noise in the inn; reproaches grew more and more fantastic. Trifon Guju, gruffer and more frowning than ever, accused the mayor that, up to a short while ago, he had said that what Luca had said was wrong, but that now he had veered round, because he knew where the gain would lie. Praviľă reddened, and yelled an indignant denial, but his voice was drowned in that of Toader Strĩmbu shouting from the entrance: 'Instead of scheming against the poor, you should come with all of us to the big boyars and ask them to divide the estate among the people now that the lady wants to get rid of it, and doesn't need it any more!'

'That's right!' approved Leonte Orbișor shrilly. 'That's the way to talk!'

Once more Trifon Guju's voice emerged, even more stridently, from the uproar: 'We'll even go to the king to get justice for ourselves!'

The mayor, his feelings eased by shouting, now went on more calmly, and even with a touch of mockery: 'You people, why d'you talk such rubbish? And to think that ordinarily you're as decent as any other human beings! Have you ever heard of a boyar scattering his land like a muck heap? Take Trifon wagging his tongue there; he wouldn't even give away a scrap of *mămăligă*⁸ - which he hasn't got anyway - yet he expects others to give away a whole estate! All right, Trifon - go and shove your ploughshare into the boyar's land! In a whole lifetime, I've never heard such talk! Nor have these people, nor Luca, who was mayor before me, nor Filip, or Dragoș, or Father Lupu, though he's the oldest of all. They're all proper, decent, but they never heard anything like that!'

'The man who lives in plenty doesn't want to hear anything, but if you've got nothing you draw hope from everything you hear!' whined Ignat Cercel. 'If we didn't we'd perish; God knows what we would do.'

'Bad, Ignat, very bad!' said the mayor heatedly once again. 'A decent man puts his shoulder to the wheel, and helps to get the cart out of the ditch; he doesn't just stand by while others push it out.'

'Only the Lord knows how much we work, until our eyes burst out of our heads, but all for nothing', Melinte Heruvimu muttered bitterly.

'Of course we have to work, Melinte, that's why we're decent human beings and not thieves!' said Praviľă seriously, but immed-

ately added in a different tone: 'It seems that I've been talking about one thing and you about something else. Well, we'll let it go, but, mind you, from now on I shan't cover anything up for anybody, I'll leave you to the police!'

'Oh well, after all we've only got one life, not a hundred!' Serafim Mogoş exclaimed.

Mogoş' words stung the feelings of the mayor, so much that although the peasant had not spoken so loudly as some of the others, he burst out: 'Now, get out, all of you! I'm wasting my words on you, it's casting pearls before swine!'

The people slowly walked out, pausing in little groups in the courtyard and then in the street, turning things over and over.

'Of course, it goes against the grain for them to hear about other people's troubles!' Ignat Cercel said in one of the noisier groups.

'Goes without saying!' agreed Toader Strimbu. 'If the rulers decide to divide the land, it'll be given to the poor who haven't got any, and then that lot won't gain anything!'

'That's why they want to buy it so much; so that the authorities won't have time to give it to us!' completed Trifon Guju in a fury. 'But we shan't go to sleep!'

Petre left with the teacher's brother and a number of older people. He was eager to turn the conversation to Master Grigoriţă, so that he could tell them how generous he had been with him, and how, a couple of days ago, when Petre had returned from Costeşti, where he had taken the lady to the station, Grigore had listened to his story from beginning to end, called for Leonte Bumbu, the steward, and ordered him to cross off the books all the debts Petre's father had made, and immediately pay him the price of a pair of oxen -- not just the price of the one which had been killed in the woods.

As they were talking of the coming separation between the boyars, Petre hastened to give the few details he knew from Marioara adding: 'The lady's hoity-toity, and real obstinate, but Master Grigoriţă, you know how he is, just, and with a heart of gold, as if he weren't a boyar at all. I'll never forget what he's done for me until my dying day!'

3

In the train Titu Herdelea learnt about the impending divorce from Nadina. He couldn't believe it. Ten days later, however, Grigore himself confirmed the fact. Titu exclaimed regretfully: 'But in spite of everything, she is such a lovely woman!'

"Too lovely!" Grigore smiled.

But much as he might like Grigore, and much as he might admire Nadina, young Herdelea had no time to concern himself greatly with their affairs. He often met Grigore, went to see him, and sometimes had his meals with him. Occasionally he also met Nadina, at a show or at Gogu Ionescu's place, when he was invited there. But apart from this the turmoil of the journalistic world involved him more and more. Under the pretext of the increasing pressure of political events, Roşu steadily multiplied the young man's duties. In order to improve *Drapelul*, the ambitious editorial secretary kept adding new features to the paper and since he had no other journalist who was so co-operative, he asked Herdelea to look after them. Titu, with his usual zeal, accepted it all without a murmur. Thus he came to be in charge of a column devoted to *Curiosities*, another to *Political and Social Echoes*, and a third to dramatic criticism – the only thing he really enjoyed writing, for he loved the theatre, and this enabled him to go more often, and free of charge, too.

On his return from Amara, Mrs Alexandrescu, his loquacious and flirtatious landlady, had a surprise waiting for him. During her cross-examination as to his doings in the country, and her inattention to his answers, which slightly wounded his feelings, she suddenly interpolated: 'You know, Tanţa has been here a good deal in your absence and talked about you . . . What a girl, Mr Titu! You can't even imagine! Only my little Mimi was ever like her; good, beautiful and clever!'

Then, having asked him to continue telling her about his stay in the country, she again interrupted two minutes later, coyly wagging her finger and casting conspiratorial glances: 'You're a naughty boy! I think you've got designs on our Tanţa! Well, I must admit you've got good taste! Girls like Tarţica can't be found down every street; beautiful, and from a good family, and educated. Well! It's true enough, you're a nice young man yourself, with a tidy income and good prospects. You'd make a fine couple, one wouldn't wish for a better; the Lord only grant that everything will turn out as I want it!'

And Titu, dazed, had to submit for half an hour to her explanations, calculations, plans, advice, and exhortations, delivered in rapid and dizzy succession. He became frightened. It was true that he loved Tanţa, but he had never considered the possibility of marriage, which in this position seemed to him ridiculous to say the least.

True enough, Tanţa came nearly every afternoon to Mrs Alexandrescu's and Herdelea felt increasingly awkward. To change his room suddenly, and thus be completely lost trace of, seemed to offer a possible salvation. One day, however, when he was at Mrs Alexandrescu's talking to Tanţa, and just as the good lady was

seeking a pretext for leaving them alone, for Tanța's green eyes became more and more sweetly imploring, a timid knock was suddenly heard at the door, and without waiting for an answer Marioara entered.

'Please excuse me', she said, a little nervously, especially when she saw Tanța for she was not shy with Mrs Alexandrescu. She had come for the lesson and found the door locked, and . . .

'But, Marioara dear, the key's in the lock!' said Titu, blushing and leaping to his feet.

'Yes? I didn't notice . . . Then I'll let myself in. Excuse me, please!' the girl said, nodding slightly and withdrawing, with a faint smile at Titu.

The moment the door closed, Tanța, who had paled, rose and took up her coat to leave. In vain were Mrs Alexandrescu's elaborate explanations. Tanța declared herself deceived; why had he not told her about this wretched girl, who entered his room as if she were at home? She burst into tears, but then calmed down a little; she would not stay, however, and left miserable, and like a martyr.

'Now what have you done?' Mrs Alexandrescu said reproachfully. 'I knew you'd get into trouble one of these days with your lessons, you're so restless and impatient. Well, what are you going to do? You must behave very carefully with Tanța, she is very sensitive and delicate.'

Another scene was waiting for him in his room, with Marioara, but he soothed her more easily.

In the evening, however, mentally drawing up a balance sheet for the day, he felt satisfied. An unforeseen event had brought his salvation: Tanța had become angry, and the affair was ended. She did not come on the second day, nor the third – all was over.

Then one Saturday, at the beginning of February, Titu had to write an important article for *Drăculea*. Deliceanu himself had given him the necessary briefing, and the young man was anxious to produce something exceptionally good, so that the editor should become convinced that in Titu they had a valuable journalist. So he rejoiced when Mrs Alexandrescu told him that she was going out with Jean to his parents; they would be late, and he should look after the house, and lock everything up and hide the key in its usual place if he went out.

He took off his suit, donned an ancient dressing-gown, slipped his feet into a pair of cheap slippers, rolled himself some cigarettes, and started work. The room grew quite warm. He had lit a small fire, which was crackling busily in the cast-iron stove. Soon he had covered several pages as smoothly as if someone had been dictating to him. His thoughts neatly arranged themselves like beads on a string. His head was swathed in cigarette smoke so dense as to appear like

a small cloud of cotton wool; cigarette ends all over the floor marked the breaks in his journalistic inspiration. By five o'clock, as it began to grow dark, he lacked only a striking closing passage. In order to stimulate the flow of his thoughts, he now re-read the whole article, sometimes murmuring those sentences which seemed the more sonorous and rounded: 'Well done!' he said to himself at the end. 'Perfect! If it isn't a sensation, well . . .!'

But that dramatic final paragraph would not come. Poking round for it in the reservoirs of his mind, he rose and took the lamp from the bedside locker, placing it on the table to light it. He carefully removed the shade and the glass, pondering all the time. As he sought for a matchbox, he thought he heard a timid knock on the door. Before he could turn round, it opened.

'Tanța!' he exclaimed; so amazed that he became embarrassed by his own surprise.

She stood near the door, gazing at him with wide eyes, as if she had just entered the house of a complete stranger.

'Tanța, please excuse me!' he went on, recovering himself. 'See how you find me! I've been working; I was just about to light the lamp and . . .'

As he moved towards her she stayed him with an instinctive gesture, and after a few moments whispered: 'Were you expecting anybody?'

As he made to answer, another searching question followed, with a strange smile: 'Not even me?'

He shook his head.

'But you see, I've come, just the same!' she murmured with another strange look. She was wrapped in her winter coat, with a fox fur round her neck, and a small velvet cap on her head. Her face seemed to radiate a luminosity which challenged the growing dusk.

'You've brought happiness into this dull room.'

Titu infused his voice with a romantic tremor, somewhat theatrical and artificial, but in his heart he was sincere. Tanța listened only to the voice of his heart, and approached him holding out both hands in acknowledgment.

'I won't disturb you, I'll be satisfied just to watch you while you write; just to be with you.'

'In any case . . .'

His voice changed; her nearness disturbed him. He was unable to complete his phrase, and, taking both her hands, pressed them to his heart. Then, without more ado, he took off her coat, while she herself removed her little hat.

Darkness secretly entered the room, obscuring outlines, blurring and confusing contours. Only the window opening on to the courtyard preserved its pallid colour, and within its frame crowded

dazzling flakes of snow, like clouds of white butterflies, overtaking each other as if seeking shelter from the cold and the dark.

'Where shall we sit?' he asked, his arm round her waist. 'You see, I haven't even got room here for us to sit next to each other!'

Her face now wore a candid smile of pure happiness. Simply, she seated herself on the edge of his bed, watching him while he added two logs to the fire, and turned the key in the lock . . . Only when he took her head in his hands, kissing her lips more insistently than usual, did she shiver slightly and murmur with timid reproach: 'Why did you lock the door?'

But the question remained suspended in the air, wreathed in smoke. Titu knelt before her and hid his face in her lap, clasping and caressing her hips. She felt sad that he had left her question unanswered, and nervously dug her fingers into his hair, gazing as if in a trance at the play of the snowflakes in the window; the locked door and the thought that she must leave instantly persisting in her mind. At the same time she whispered through half-closed lips: 'Titu, darling, please behave; be a good boy, very good . . . Promise? . . . Promise!'

He rose suddenly as if awaking, from a dream, and said hoarsely: 'I swear . . . Swear!'

As he seated himself on the edge of the bed beside her, it seemed to both of them that his oath had been exaggerated, breaking the spell which had begun to weave itself around them. Tanța felt herself obliged to excuse her presence. She had not thought of coming to see him today, either - why should she, as he did not love her very much, not terribly much. But when she had seen Lenuța and Jenică arrive at their place, and knew that they were going to stay the Lord knows how long, she realized that he must be alone, and had said to herself that he did not realize how much she loved him, and that was why he did not appreciate her love enough. Why should she listen to the gossip of old ladies when she had so much to tell him? And as she had been owing a visit to a friend of hers for ages, she had left quickly. and . . .

She did not look at Titu, who listened to her words without taking them in, pressing his body closer and closer against her own, feeling the beating of her heart more and more distinctly, and occasionally the movement of her body against his. Suddenly she interrupted herself, as if overcome by a great fear, and rose, murmuring: 'And now I have to go . . . Please let me go, Titu darling! Where did you put my coat?'

Titu was terrified. The very thought of being left alone with his unfinished article, seeking an effective phrase to round it off, was painful. Now everything not connected with Tanța seemed unimportant. Nothing in the world could take the place of the charm of

her presence in this room, filled with cigarette smoke. At that moment, all life, all wisdom seemed to be there in the soft green of her eyes, in the gentle whispering voice, letting fall mysterious words, in her warm body and its frightened movements. Desperate lest he should lose her, he barred her way, and embracing her and looking deep into her eyes, whispered hoarsely: 'You can't leave me . . . like this.'

He was ashamed of his words, and she, echoing her heart, answered with a surprised smile which exactly reflected his words. His fingers became entangled in the thin, white material of her blouse, which closed with hooks down the front. With the same dazed smile, Tanța helped him to undo them, although at the same time she whispered an instinctive reproach: 'Leave my blouse, Titu. No, no, please . . . I want to go.'

Titu, too, muttered something in a hoarse voice, without knowing what he said. Their words mingled in a secret whisper of joy.

Then Tanța stood straight, her legs pressing together; only her chemise, which did not reach her knees, clinging like an useless defence round her body. She crossed her arms so as to hide her breasts, which, with their small nipples, seemed to prevent the shirt from slipping down.

'I'm cold . . .' she whispered in a barely perceptible voice.

Titu took her in his arms as one would take a sleepy child, laid her in his bed, and covered her up. She lay there with her face upwards, looking straight into Titu's eyes as he kept re-arranging the blanket. Then he suddenly realized that he lay next to her. His cold hands caressed her firm breasts, moving slowly down towards her burning stomach. Half-dazed, she again murmured: 'No, no, no', but turned towards him and folded her arms around his neck. And then she felt his knee opening her legs . . .

A long time passed before she came to herself. Titu sat on the edge of the bed, kissing the tears from her cheeks. She heard him say: 'Are you sorry, Tanța? I don't want you to be sorry!'

She opened her eyes, which seemed to glitter in the darkness filling the room. Shaking her head on the pillow, she said, with a new sweetness in her voice: 'No . . .'

And after a while she asked: 'Do you still love me?'

Titu responded with a storm of kisses. She interrupted him with a further question: 'Do you believe now that I love you?'

'I never doubted it', answered young Herdelea. 'It was you who doubted my love.'

'Shouldn't I doubt it any more?' she murmured.

'No!' Titu answered, closing her lips.

As soon as he was alone, he pulled the curtain across and lit the lamp. The weak yellowish light brought him back to reality. The

mysterious perfume of her body making his head swim, still lingered in the room, as did her broken words, little moans, and the writhing of her body. He realized now that his love had taken a new turn, full of responsibilities, at a time when he was only just beginning to make his way in the world. Doubtless he loved Tanța, but had he the right to crush her life, tying her to his destiny, so unsure from all points of view? How would he be able to keep a wife, when his own upkeep in the future was still a problem? He began to find excuses for himself: he had resisted; Tanța had come of her own accord; not every love, however strong, led to the registry office – there had been other cases, too . . . But, suddenly disgusted, he cut across his excuses, and said to himself accusingly: 'You're a vile person, Titu! You should be ashamed!'

4

Grigore Iuga could not stay in the country any longer. Loneliness drove him away, together with his father's insistence that he should not destroy his marriage because of a natural and temporary misunderstanding. He was too disgusted and ashamed to tell his father the truth. It seemed to him that his manhood had been insulted; five years had not sufficed to enable him to awaken in his wife even the essential decency not to be unfaithful to him under his own roof. Nevertheless, he still was not quite sure of his own heart. He would find himself seeking an excuse for her behaviour, as if his lovewere not yet dead, but only awaited some tempting excuse to forget and go on as before. He despised himself and was afraid of his weakness. At least in the seething life of the capital he would not be alone.

He had moved back to the room in which he had stayed as a student in his aunt Mariuca's house, and found it arranged for him with meticulous care. Seeing that he liked it, his aunt was delighted and said: 'So you like it, Grigoriță? I got it ready myself. I want you to feel at home, and not to lack anything, so that you won't regret . . .'

She said no more. She was well aware that Grigore knew that she did not like Nadina, so she did not want to mention her at this moment. But Grigore answered as he never had before: 'As to regrets, you needn't worry, my dear Aunt!'

He made an appointment with Gogu Ionescu, and they met next day at the Club. Gogu was all consternation, and understood nothing. He had been absolutely horrified when he had heard the news from Nadina. How was it possible? He had thought that the utmost harmony had reigned between them. Of course, he would never allow himself to meddle or give advice in such delicate matters,

but . . . Naturally he loved Grigore like a brother, and always would, whatever their family relations might be. It was true that Nadina was rather difficult. Although he always refrained from interfering in the personal life of other people, even his own relatives, he had repeatedly spoken to her, as a brother to a sister, telling her that she overdid her flirtations and abused the kindly tolerance of her husband. Yes, he would take it upon himself to ask Nadina, on Grigore's behalf, whether she had started the divorce proceedings, and what stage they had reached; he perfectly understood that, for all sorts of reasons, Grigore, once he had left their home, would not want to approach her directly again. Grigore met him the next day, at the same place and Gogu told him that immediately she had arrived from the country, that was, ten days ago, Nadina had sent for Olimp Stavrat, the lawyer, and asked him to institute proceedings at once. Probably the papers were at the Court by now. Grigore thanked him, and also sent a message thanking Nadina, adding that he would hurry matters up to the best of his ability, as it was in the interest of both of them to finish with these formalities as soon as possible, and regain their freedom.

He then called to see Baloleanu, who knew nothing about the divorce. The lawyer was amazed and regretful, and so was Melania. They made him stay for lunch; he must, he could no longer excuse himself by saying that . . . Grigore built himself a shell against sympathy. Before passing from the sumptuous study into the dining room, Baloleanu assumed an official expression: 'So it's really serious and irrevocable, Grigoriță.'

'Really, my dear Alexandru, do you think I would joke about such matters?'

'Then I will look after this affair, and I assure you that you will get your divorce in the shortest possible time!' the lawyer said gravely and firmly. After some moments, however, he reverted to his former jovial manner, and said: 'You see, at the Palace of Justice I always have some influence, thanks to my humble talents!'

'I only hope that your intervention will not be so prompt as your services for my Transylvanian friend - you remember?' Grigore remarked teasingly.

Baloleanu was at a loss for a second, and then burst into friendly indignation: 'Really Grigoriță, why didn't you remind me about him before? I quite forgot! What was his name now? But didn't we settle that he should come and see me to . . . Well, my dear fellow, why didn't the boy come?'

'Let's leave it for now, I've pushed him on to *Drapelul*, so . . .'

'Oh, you've already laid hands on him for your party,' laughed Baloleanu, 'and you accuse us of being partisan!'

Young Iuga went with Baloleanu to the Court, himself, several

times, just to make sure. After he had seen the first formalities through, he felt sufficiently confident to go to the Predeleanus. He could still hear his voice declaring emphatically: 'I'm in love!' and the very memory made him embarrassed. He only told Predeleanu of the affair when they were alone, without being asked. Victor although perplexed, did not seek an explanation. During the meal, neither Tecla nor Miss Postelnicu mentioned Nadina's name. However, Grigore caught the latter young lady looking at him with a curiosity she could barely contain. Only pleasant matters were discussed, not even politics were mentioned. The conversation centred on the many balls, shows, receptions and parties of all kinds which now agitated Bucharest and gave it a lively atmosphere. Predeleanu even remarked, just to tease his sister-in-law: 'I think this season was specially arranged for Olguța - dances and parties everywhere.'

'That's how people forget their worries and the troubles hanging over them,' Teclă said.

'Yes, but I don't know whether you've noticed; all dances seem to be getting more and more erotic and sensuous - sometimes one feels downright ashamed to watch them,' went on Victor more seriously.

'Don't be a prude!' Olga retorted, energetically defending her one passion. 'Why don't you admit that you don't like dancing, and that's why you find so many faults with it!'

Grigore did not join the controversy, for fear the discussion might touch on Nadina. The conversation veered round to the great festival which the Obol philanthropic society was organizing for the 19th of February at the National Theatre. It was the most important high society event, and the whole of the royal family would be there, with all the best people. Although the seats were a fabulous price, everyone was booked. To ensure that all of *élite* society could be satisfied, it even seemed that the performance would have to be repeated. The programme included a review written by three very witty gentlemen from the highest society, and performed only by fashionable young women and girls. Olga had a part, dancing of course, and was a fever of activity.

As soon as Madame Mariuca Constantinescu discovered that the divorce was at last under way, she cast discretion to the winds and began to tell her nephew all she knew about Nadina, saying that she had said nothing before because she had not wanted to make him miserable, or lead him to think that she wanted to break up his marriage. Had she not warned him as soon as she heard of his intention to marry - but very tactfully, of course, for in such cases any advice of this sort is unwelcome. When Nadina was still a girl, it was obvious what sort of a woman she would be.

Of course, nobody would say that it wasn't natural for a young

girl to be chic, lively and flirtatious, but there were limits! Nadina had absolutely shocked decent people wherever she went, with her mad ways, and the pack of admirers at her heels. Still, if she had at least finished with it all when she had married . . . But exploiting the blind love of her husband, she had not shrunk from taking a lover in the first year of their marriage – if, indeed, not in the first month. Others had followed in turn – his aunt herself knew for certain of five, the latest being Raul Brumaru, with whom she had been abroad last summer, too, on God knew whose money. Some said that Brumaru lived on his Club winnings, but others asserted that he was very well off, and that Nadina absolutely milked him.

Grigore tried to stem the flow of these confidences. Once he had decided to divorce Nadina, he did not care what she was doing now, and even less what she had done before. For the sake of his own self-respect, he only wanted to remember those things about which he need not blush. Perhaps it was silly to look at life that way, but he . . . It was in vain, his aunt Mariuca would not stop until she had enumerated the four other gentlemen who had enjoyed Nadina's favours. Each succeeding day she came with some detail, or fresh news just received from a well-intentioned friend, until Grigore began to avoid her, and considered moving to a hotel, thus regaining peace for his soul.

Fortunately at the end of January his father arrived in Bucharest, and Mariuca tried to serve him with the latest news about Nadina. Miron Iuga listened for a while with wide-open eyes, and then interrupted her brusquely: 'Enough of all that chatter, Mariuca! It's not seemly for the widow of a Rumanian general to peddle all the gossip which inevitably circulated about a beautiful woman. But you are like my poor wife, God rest her soul. It's not for nothing that you were sisters. You think that all women have to be busy with the saucepans or knit winter socks for their husbands. Times have changed, Mariuca!'

'But, Miron, Grigore is divorcing her!' objected Madame Constantinescu, disconcerted. She was somewhat afraid of old Iuga, whom she knew as being very autocratic, while she had never been afraid of the General, who had been as sweet as sugar-candy, and had never dreamed of doing anything she would not approve.

'You listen to Grigore, who is only a child?' queried the old man, refusing to allow his son to interrupt him. 'Who told you that a petition meant an actual divorce? Until the decree nisi has been issued, it is no more than a misunderstanding between the two parties, my dear Mariuca!'

Miron Iuga had left all the preparations for the new labour agreements in the air at Amara, a question which was now all the

more delicate, because a rumour had reached him that the peasants wanted to change the terms. But he was haunted by the Babaroaga estate, and had made up his mind to get it, whatever the sacrifice. Grigore's intention to divorce seemed to him the biggest and most urgent obstacle to be overcome.

Before seeing Nadina, however, he decided to call on Dumescu at the Rumanian Bank, and have a preliminary chat; negotiations would follow after he had learned from Nadina the price she would demand and the conditions of payment. Grigore accompanied him as far as the bank, for he had an appointment with Baloleanu. On the way the old man attentively studied the innumerable bills and posters announcing various balls and other entertainments.

'People here know that they live well!' murmured Miron contemptuously. 'Wherever you go, all you see is incitement to gaiety and debauchery. They don't care - we work so that they can have banquets!'

Constantin Dumescu's face lit up as soon as he saw the old man, and he embraced Miron with an enthusiasm which seemed almost unbelievable, compared with his normal sobriety and reserve. He adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles, always a sign of deep emotion, and his normally cold glance became a smiling one. After some minutes spent in affectionate questions and answers Miron Iuga said: 'I can see you're very busy, Costică, and I didn't come to bother you. Some day soon, we'll meet and talk matters over at leisure. I don't want to keep you more than a couple of seconds. Look, this is what it's about, Costică!'

And he told his story. Dumescu listened with deep attention. Old Miron observed his expression changing. Finally, the director spoke: 'Well, my dear Miron, our friendship is too old for me to avoid giving you an immediate and straightforward answer.'

The straightforward answer was a negative one, though the pill was then sugared with explanations. This was no time to buy land, Miron had enough; let him only have health and energy to work it. The refusal was made only in his own interest. If Dumescu had not been so fond of Miron, he would have let him have any sum he asked, for the bank knew that the security was good, as his estate could be sold. But for his own part, Dumescu would rather make his friend sad today than beggar him tomorrow, this was the duty of an old friend.

'I wonder at your plans, Miron? Are you living in another world? Don't you see or hear anything? Can't you feel how things are coming to a head, how something is creaking? Tomorrow, or the day after, we may wake up to see the big estates expropriated. Then what would you do with your obligations to the bank? The rumour is going round more and more insistently. I don't give my opinion,

I just state a fact. And the agitation of the peasants is a parallel process . . . No – don't think you can dismiss the matter lightly. It might not be the case in your part of the world, but this agitation is real. Perhaps it is precisely this factor which has given rise to the idea of expropriation – I don't know. It may be. And then again, I don't say that the danger is imminent. I don't know; but it exists, and in such conditions one cannot seriously consider buying estates. Land has become rather a doubtful proposition, and so it will remain until the situation clears up. So . . . Don't be taken in by the permanent holiday spirit in Bucharest. It is a symptom of the disease; an epidemic of balls, dances and parties always precedes something evil, or underlines it. A façade which glitters too brightly always conceals something rotten. A solid house doesn't make a show, doesn't try to catch one's eyes with its façade. I don't go in for any politics – I'm not even interested in their wrangles. Here, at the bank, the very pulse of life is felt, and ours beats extremely erratically. The organism is shaking, Miron! We must be prudent until a remedy is found!

Not at all convinced, but all the more vexed, Miron Iuga endeavoured not to show his irritation. They separated, promising each other that they would meet again, this had only been a preliminary chat. Miron was sure that Dumescu would not hold out till the end.

'Poor Costică!' the old man said to himself. 'He's a nice chap, it's a pity he's so limited – he's been the same ever since we became such cronies!'

His anger passed more quickly than he had expected. In fact, he shouldn't have become involved with Dumescu before he had straightened things out with Nadina – for it was there that the main difficulty lay. He could find the money anywhere in Rumania, the thing was to be able to use it.

Nadina was waiting for him, as she had known he was coming. She was a very nymph, receiving him with her customary sweetness as if nothing untoward had happened since they had parted a month ago in Amara.

'I would like you to stay to lunch, papa, if you would care to?' she said, with a candid and enquiring smile, as soon as she had ushered him into her favourite little salon.

'Oh, of course I'll stay, with great pleasure, Nadina!' said Miron gallantly, well pleased.

They started discussing the two questions in which old Iuga was interested, even before sitting down to the meal. Concerning the divorce, he proposed a reconciliation, adding that of course his proposal had not been authorized by Grigoriță, but guaranteeing that he would persuade his son if she would reconsider. Nadina

refused, smilingly but firmly. The initiative had not been hers, but Grigore's. She would have continued, although in many respects she had been dissatisfied, but by now their estrangement had become public. Everybody knew that they were divorcing; a reconciliation would make them both look ridiculous. Moreover, today they could still make a life of their own; tomorrow it might be more difficult. Miron persisted in his attempts to persuade her, but she interrupted him: 'Really, papa dear, your insistence flatters me. It is a proof of your love, and touches me deeply, but look, please,' (and here she placed her hands together as if in prayer) 'give me the supreme proof of your love and . . . let's talk about something else.'

'What I wanted to talk to you about can't even be mentioned now, if your decision is really final and irrevocable!' muttered the old man, very dejectedly. He continued, after a short pause: 'I could discuss Babaroaga with my daughter-in-law, but with my son's ex-wife it would be impossible.'

Nadina's smile revealed her pearly white teeth.

'Oh but, dear papa, you're quite mistaken!'

On the contrary, it was only with his ex-daughter-in-law that he could really talk about the estate. She had not made up her mind to sell it, and would not have done so, had she remained with Grigore. Now, however, as soon as she could dispose of things on her own, she would settle the question of Babaroaga. It would be rather awkward to continue to have business which was connected with Grigore, even if it was only in his neighbourhood. She would only be too glad to get rid of the estate, but until she obtained the divorce she couldn't possibly do anything because she would need her husband's consent. Within a month at the latest, she hoped the formalities would be ended. Then she would hurry into the country, she could stay at Gogu's manor at Lespezi, and would not leave until she had settled the sale.

'Eh, but you're a real business-woman, and no joke!' exclaimed the old man. 'We're going to have a job with you!'

He joked and smiled, but he was not satisfied at all. All his attempts to wring at least a definite promise from her had failed. Nadina had slyly and efficiently slipped through his fingers like quicksilver. It seemed to him that he had got more out of her in the first interview at Amara, but that had not been very satisfactory either. Then the burden of the argument had been that he should be the favoured buyer. But there was no denying it, the divorce had made his struggle that much more difficult, and precisely because of this he did not give up. He was not afraid of obstacles; to be ready for any eventuality he went to try out several other banks where he had friends. He did not meet with flat refusals, ('We'll see', 'We'll

consult', 'We'll talk about it later'), but Dumescu's arguments were repeated almost word for word, as if they all had an agreement between them. He resumed unofficial conversations with Dumescu, just the two of them at table, and obtained a vague promise. Costică was so fond of him that he could not continue his attitude of downright refusal. Each of them hoped that he would succeed in convincing the other; Dumescu that he would persuade Iuga to give up the idea of buying, and Iuga that he could get Dumescu to help him with the purchase.

Grigore was aware of what his father was striving for. From his looks, and some of the words he let drop, young Iuga knew that that he was not overjoyed at the results he had achieved. The old man had announced as soon as he arrived that he wanted to see the Predeleanus, and after a fortnight or so, they went there together.

The old man, too, liked this family. 'Decent people!' he used to call them, thinking first of all of Victor's father, whom he had known. Miss Postelnicu's whole interest was focussed on the Obol review, which was to take place within only a few days; and she was exasperated that here everyone was discussing agriculture, just to please old Miron, of course. Impressed as he was by Dumescu's arguments, (much though he might believe that they had no foundation), he sought for support against them, and was depressed when he failed to find it. Predeleanu, too, told him that there was a certain ferment among the peasants, not to the extent that was rumoured in Bucharest, it was true, but it existed. In his own village, Delga, according to reliable reports from his steward, the peasants were seeking new, and of course more favourable, agreements. Landowners and lease-holders in Moldavia with whom he had spoken, all sober people, who knew the peasants, had portrayed the situation there as one which gave much more cause for anxiety. This seemed to show that the phenomenon was general; that the same causes had produced the same effects all over the country. Explanations were not lacking, they were even paraded ostentatiously in the most unexpected places, but without being conclusive. What was valid for one region, would not necessarily apply to the others, and yet it did.

'Because we don't want to see things as they are, Victor,' interrupted Grigore suddenly, and with passion, after having restrained himself for some time so as not to contradict his father. 'The peasant loses everywhere by the system of contracts which has been imposed on him. His debts grow bigger every year, until they reach the present unbearable dimensions. In our place most of the people are so deep in debt that even if they worked right through next year not only would they get no return for their labour but they would not

even be able to pay what they owe and would remain in debt. With such prospects before them, it's no wonder that the peasants are restless, it's only normal and natural!

Miron Iuga gave a slight, ironical smile at his son's assertions, and then, as if they were unworthy of consideration, said to Predeleanu: 'The peasants don't lie on a bed of roses precisely, because the landowners, too, are in a bad way, and because the whole of Rumanian agriculture is going to the dogs! There have been difficult years, when next to nothing has been produced, and yet the peasants were not turbulent; they looked after their own worries and suffered and endured like us! This season, thank God, we have quite a normal year! Those who had common sense managed to get in enough to cover their needs, but the lazy ones, the drinkers, they haven't got anything. It has been like this ever since the world was created. How can one say that there is serious dissatisfaction in Amara, where the peasants are rushing about trying to buy Nadina's estate, setting themselves up in competition with others? No, the disease is elsewhere, my friends, whatever you say. The real disease is the weakness of the government, which tolerates the demagoguery of any raw upstart who sets himself up as a defender of the peasantry. Only let the government take these gentry, so suddenly and suspiciously fond of the poor peasant, take them by the scruff of the neck and fill the prisons with them, and then see how the restlessness of the peasants will disappear at once.'

'Of course, the opposition profits by the impotence of the government, while the latter interests itself with petty, everlasting personal dissensions,' Victor agreed. 'But the opposition is just as guilty when it recurs to such disloyal agitation!'

'Not disloyal, sir!' Miron cried heatedly. 'Criminal! What could be more criminal than whipping up the appetites of a greedy mob? And that is just what they are doing! They promise to give the peasants our land precisely in order to sow discord between the peasants and us. They don't care that in doing so they set fire to the country; they are not concerned with the country's interests, only with the interests of their party. They are the masters in the towns, exploiting us. They are insatiable. But they have not been able to subjugate us, neither with their banks, nor with their loans, or with their industries. It's only we who resist them. So because they didn't manage to overthrow us that way, now they have become the defenders of the peasantry against us; they, who never crossed the borders of the towns, for fear they might soil their shoes. They want to divide our land between the peasants - it never occurs to them to divide their profits from the factories and banks. In fact, they want to deprive the peasants of their heads by murdering us, for then the herd of peasants, without a leader, will be at their mercy.'

It's shocking and disgusting, especially when you see that we, who are condemned to death, just sit gossiping about the leadership of the party, the intrigues and comings and goings within the government, and suchlike nonsense!

To moderate the atmosphere created by the old man's outburst Grigore put in smilingly: 'I would never have thought, father, that you could be so passionate about politics!'

'Crime is not politics, Grigoriță!' Miron replied in a milder tone, for he himself realized that he had spoken too strongly for a dinner-discussion. 'Crime is crime. What they are doing is not politics, it's committing a crime.'

'It's true they have no scruples,' Predeleanu observed, to ease the tension. 'They would even create a revolution in Rumania if it were in the interests of their party.'

Thanks to Mrs Predeleanu's intervention, gentler topics then prevailed, and to the vast relief of Miss Olga, the great Obol festival was mentioned. After a while, however, the old man found something to object to her: 'I've nothing against the Obol, mind you; it may really serve a good purpose, but in general there is too much luxury and enjoyment in Bucharest. One gets the impression of large-scale debauchery. How this fits in with the atmosphere of unrest in the country I don't know, I'm sure. A little sobriety would do no harm. Of course, the whole government should put a stop to these excesses. The people can be irresponsible, but not the government. What would the peasants say if they saw this monstrous permanent round of gaiety? They haven't even enough for their *mămăligă*, while the boyars' skins are bursting with their dinner-parties!'

He suddenly recollected himself, and smiled warmly, to remove the harsh effect of his words. Finally, he was so charming to Olga, who had at first been intimidated by his cold gravity, that she dared to invite him to the festival to see her dancing. Miron answered, smiling: 'I'm very sorry that I shan't be able to admire such a charming young lady; there is another performance awaiting me in the country, not such a merry one, but one which cannot be delayed. However, I'll leave Grigoriță behind to applaud on my behalf as well!'

Grigore, naturally, did go to the great festival, like everyone else in high society. It was the most elegant gathering the National Theatre had ever seen. Even in the galleries, where the seats were numbered, sat possessors of respectable names. Several committee ladies ran hurriedly about, joyfully whispering to their friends in passing.

'This evening will be inscribed in golden letters in the annals of Rumania!'

Before the curtain went up, Grigore, glancing behind him, observed Titu Herdelea sitting a little way back.

'Hallo there! What are you doing here among the boyars?' he asked, pleased. 'See you later in the interval!'

Titu was there in his official capacity as a theatre critic. He was wearing his black suit, but nevertheless had at first been embarrassed among so many tail-coats. However, upon seeing his colleagues dressed in a similar manner, he regained his confidence. Some even wore their day clothes, as a demonstration that they were there on duty and not there for pleasure.

The sensation of the evening was Nadina, in an apache dance, the latest thing in Paris. Her partner was Raul Brumaru. They performed with such brilliance that they had to give an encore, so tumultuous was the applause of the select audience. Titu Herdelea was not over-impressed. 'Madame Nadina', as he now called her, was certainly beautiful, and performed charmingly, but a less abandoned type of dance would have suited her better, and would have been more dignified. He watched Grigore's expression curiously as Nadina performed her gyrations with Raul. But Grigore looked on unblinkingly like any other spectator. Titu was more taken with the delightful lady in a suite of Rumanian dances: who could it be? He had not dared to buy a programme, as the sellers were all ladies who would have expected some fantastic contribution in aid of their good cause.

In the interval he met Grigore Iuga, and the two of them withdrew into a corner of the foyer to have a smoke. The fact that a show had been arranged by the best society, all in Rumanian, and not a motley of foreign languages, delighted him, and he pressed his opinion on Grigore, as if he suspected that the latter disagreed. How right the students have been to protest against the latter practice. In order to make his point he wanted specially to mention the young lady who had danced in the Rumanian costume, and only regretted that he did not know her name, so that he could give it in his review in *Drapelul*.

'Do you mean to say you didn't recognize Miss Olga Postelnicu, my young friend?' asked Grigore in amused reproach. 'She's Predeleanu's sister-in-law!'

At that moment Victor Predeleanu appeared, whereupon Grigore denounced his companion: 'Look at him! He didn't recognize Olga! He didn't know who was the young lady he liked best of all and whom he wanted to praise in his paper.'

'I'm sure Olga will be thrilled, Mr Herdelea! It didn't matter if you didn't recognize her. It just means that you have to come and see us more often, so that you don't forget us!' said Victor, shaking his hand.

They proceeded to analyse each performer in detail, omitting Nadina and Brumaru, however. While their criticism and praise was in full spate, Gogu Ionescu suddenly burst upon them, perspiring with enthusiasm, shining and hoarse, eagerly asking them, as everybody he met: 'Well, what do you say about Nadina and Raul? Weren't they wonderful? What phenomenal talent! What a success! Why, the hall was shaking! The chandelier was swaying with the thunder of the applause!'

Then, noticing the embarrassment on the faces of his three listeners, he suddenly realized that he had made a *faux pas* and desperately sought to put it right, continuing after a short pause in the same agitated voice: 'Isn't it an extraordinary season? Overwhelming! I don't remember ever having known so many entertainments and dances as there have been this winter. And I have to go everywhere because Nadina . . .'

He stopped short. He had mentioned Nadina again; another *faux pas*. He was unfortunate. His enthusiasm dwindled, and he added, wiping his forehead with a sigh: 'I find it rather tiring, I must say; it's as if everybody had gone mad!'

5

Ion Pravilă could not openly join those who sought to purchase Babaroaga. He was afraid boyar Miron would find out, and then he would not only lose his place as mayor, but the boyar would make life impossible for him in the village and the Lord only knew what he would do. True, the boyar had a good heart; he was all right as long as you went along with him. Pravilă had done quite well out of being loyal and humble. Still, he couldn't just stand by and look on; a bit of land wouldn't be a bad thing to have, after all. One didn't often get such a chance. When he heard that boyar Miron had gone to Bucharest, obviously for the lady's estate, he had sent for Luca Talabă and they had agreed that the men here, too, should go and see the lady and press the matter. And supposing they got no satisfaction, they should go and complain to people in higher positions because in other parts the peasants had been helped to buy land and divide it among themselves. More than that, when Luca had been mayor, a document had once arrived from the Ministry advising them to join together to purchase land, and promising them the support of the authorities. It would be a good thing if as many as possible went, so that the big boyar should know that it was all the people who were asking for land; although it would cost a lot, and they would have to wring the money out of their poverty. Despite his habitual meanness, the mayor offered to pay

the fare for a poor man, namely Smaranda's son Petre, who would be a great help, as he had been in Bucharest for three years in the army.

As soon as Miron Iuga returned to Amara, the peasants, seven in all, started for Burdea, where they boarded the train. They arrived in Bucharest in the morning, and reached Strada Argintari at lunch-time. A young lady in a white apron met them at the top of the stairs, and told them that madam had only just woken up, for she had been to a big party last night, and they should wait outside, that is, in the street, until she called them. They waited quietly on the pavement; after all, what else did they have to do, and what had they come for? Finally another young lady called them in, supervising them as they wiped their feet. Miss Nadina was gay, and talked to them very nicely, letting them speak, too, but in the end told them that she would sell to the one who offered the best price, and paid cash. Petre, who was bolder than the rest, said to her: 'After all, madam, we have come such a long way, and spent money on it. We thought that as you had a good heart you would take pity on us, and sell it to us cheaper, because . . .'

Nadina turned to him in surprise, and recognized her former driver. She gave him a long look to put him in his place. Petre met the look, simply, as if to say that he was not afraid of a woman, even if she were a boyar. Then she answered, with a tinge of contempt: 'You think that just for your blue eyes I shall throw my property away? Oh no, my lad; no, my good people; I sell my estate to get money, and not to be charitable to others. The state can be charitable if it wants to.'

The peasants paused at the corner of the street and turned things over until the cold penetrated into their very bones. Then, through a snow storm which grew steadily fiercer, they made their way towards Gura Moșilor, where Petre had a friend from Costești who owned an inn and would take them in cheaply. They took a few bites from the food they had brought with them, and went on talking until late in the room next to the kitchen where the landlord had put them. Next day, as soon as dawn broke, they hurried to the Ministry of Crown Lands. Here they had to wait in the courtyard. 'The public is only admitted after eleven!' shouted the owner of a long black board from behind the barred entrance. Other people, cold and timid like themselves, had come with their troubles from elsewhere. When the gate opened, all crowded in. The porter, short and morose, his beard reaching to his waist, stopped them.

'Not so quick, there; this isn't a theatre! What do you want, and who are you looking for?'

Speaking respectfully, each began to recount his troubles. The porter, satisfied, softened a little, but would not listen to the end.

'The Minister hasn't arrived yet. He may come later. You can stay here a while to warm yourselves.'

And so they stayed. After an hour or more, the porter announced that the Minister was not coming that day. Tomorrow, he said. They returned to the inn and continued their discussion.

Next day they were luckier. The porter sent them upstairs, the Minister was in. After getting lost amongst all the corridors, they reached a very stuffy office full of people. A smiling young gentleman with a powdered face received them in a friendly manner: 'Well, and what's the matter with you, my friends? What brings you all the way from . . . ? Ah yes, from Argeş?'

Lupu Chirițoiu, with many flourishes, began to tell their story. The gentleman did not get in the least impatient, but as soon as he had understood what it was about, interrupted: 'Ah, an estate for sale . . . I see. Wait a minute.'

He pressed a button, wrote two lines on a small piece of paper, and gave it to the boy who answered, saying meanwhile: 'Now look, my friends, the Minister is too busy just now to see you. But I'm sending you to another gentleman who has the power from the Minister to solve all these questions, so that you will get justice. That's it, my friends – messenger, take them to the director general!'

They all trooped after the messenger along various corridors until suddenly they found themselves in front of a stern, sullen old gentleman. He heard their story from beginning to end, and then asked them reproachfully: 'Now do you want to buy the lady's estate or do you want to take it from her?'

'Oh no, not us . . .' Luca Talabă began to protest.

'You shut up now!' the director rapped out. 'You've spoken enough, and I've listened to you. The ministry has neither the right nor is it in a position to interfere in transactions between an individual selling his agricultural property and prospective purchasers, with certain exceptions laid down by law, which do not apply in this case. You have simply got into the habit of running around with baseless complaints, instead of coming to terms with your own boyars in a decent manner. And now you've got the idea of demanding land from the boyars at ridiculous prices, or even for nothing. You've lost all sense of proportion. Behave yourselves, hearken to your boyars, and work hard! You must be industrious, and not listen to evil tongues. You are the very backbone of the country, you . . .'

Out of all these words, Luca Talabă only gathered that Babaroaga was slipping through their fingers, all the effort and expense having been in vain. He could not bear the thought, and suddenly burst out: 'Well, sir, but why should others take away the land from us . . .'

But he was not allowed to finish. The director general leapt to his feet, his face and bald head growing scarlet, as if a bottle of red ink had been poured on top of his head, and roared: 'Shut up, you scoundrel, or I'll send for the police to soften you up, you rascal! I'm spending my breath and my time trying to teach you, and you don't even behave properly!' (he recovered himself, and went on more calmly). 'You've started off down the wrong road, you wretches; no longer satisfied with what the Lord has given you, you are hungry for the property of others. Come to your senses! Go back home and do some honest work – it's work which is the most precious possession of our beloved country! And if you really want to buy the lady's estate, ask her and the other boyars. Polite words bring pleasant replies, understand?'

The peasants gazed at his mouth, and its gold teeth. As they left the room, his harsh voice followed them. Having wandered about the corridors again, they at last found themselves at the door of the Minister's office once more. After they had left the bald director general, Luca Talabă had said they should go on with their efforts, and try again to see the Minister. But hardly had they squeezed themselves in when a horrified messenger rushed at them and said in a scandalized voice: 'Go away! Get out quickly, the Minister is leaving!'

The door of the Minister's sanctum opened. A boyar appeared, swathed in furs, and wearing galoshes, a cap of otter fur protecting his ears; his jaundiced face was heavy and bored. He was accompanied by the young man they had seen previously. The Minister, in order to demonstrate to those standing in the corridor that he was not distant, but took an interest in the fate of the peasants, who came under his department, paused for a moment and drawled: 'What's the matter with you lack? What wind has blown you here?'

The young gentleman whispered in his ear, and the Minister said, satisfied, as he passed on: 'Oh yes. So you've been there . . . Very well. Then he has told you what you should do. You must bear in mind everything he said, because he understands your troubles and knows how to cure them.'

He slowly descended the marble staircase, the peasants standing behind, cap in hand. Everybody disappeared, as if the sun had set.

'Come on, let's go; there's nothing more to be done here!' Petre said.

'Come on!' Luca Talabă mumbled, as he placed his *căciulă* back on his head.

They went straight to the station, hoping to find a train; if not, they would spend the night there, as they had used up all their money, and only had enough for their tickets. They were lucky.

As the train started, all crossed themselves simultaneously in the customary manner.

It was warm in the carriage, and there were quite a few passengers, mostly peasants, some from Ialomița, others from Muscel, Teleorman, or even farther. Tongues loosened in the warmth. But the seven from Amara, sitting huddled together in a corner and smouldering with rage, only spoke a word from time to time. Lupu Chirițoiu grumbled that they had spent a terrible lot of money in vain. Luca admitted he was right, and swallowed dryly. However, gradually, as if coming to themselves, they began to talk their experiences over, and weigh them up. Every one of them felt he must add something, or at least sigh. If it had not been like it was, things might have turned out differently. Other passengers began to join in their lament, some out of interest, some because they had already heard about such things, or had suffered similar experiences themselves.

Anxious to demonstrate to all in the carriage that his hair had not grown white for nothing, old Lupu remarked: 'I told them from the very beginning that the boyars don't want to sell land to the peasants, but they wouldn't listen to me, and in the end I myself followed them!'

'I've been listening to what you said; I wonder you didn't know how things are – after all, everybody knows!' The speaker was a handsome young man, neatly dressed, his blue eyes full of winning kindness. 'People have tried to buy land from the boyars in my parts, too, but they never succeeded, because other boyars got hold of it, so that it shouldn't get into the hands of the peasants, otherwise who would the boyars get to work their land? We did the same thing a year or so ago, and wearied and sweated like you, all with the same result'.

'Where do you come from?' enquired Luca Talabă.

'From Focșani, if you've heard of it,' the young man answered. 'It's a long way away; right on the other side of the country.'

'Oh yes, I've heard about it,' bragged Marin Stan. 'I was in those parts when I was in the army, on manoeuvres. Is living as hard for the people over there as it is here?'

'It's very hard!' the stranger sighed, nodding. 'Maybe even harder than in these parts. Really, it drives you to despair. Do you think I like travelling about with a bag full of icons to sell? Heavens above! Nobody in my family has ever done anything like it! All of us, my wife and the children too, work from early spring into late autumn, and even then we can hardly manage, so I'm driven into doing this until the Lord helps us to get some land. In our parts the people are hopeful, they say the king will soon start dividing the estates, as has been rumoured for many years.'

'People do keep saying so all the time, it's true!' agreed a little man in the corner, with a ruddy, perspiring face.

'That's how people talk down our way too!' said Lupu Chirițoiu, looking across the man in the corner. 'But I don't think the boyars will let the king do that, because they're not fools, either, and all the power is in their hands!'

'That's just what I wanted to say,' the young man with the icons broke in. 'The king can't do anything on his own, if nobody stands by him, and the boyars are against it. People in my part of the country say that in other parts the authorities have begun to divide up the boyars' land. But then about a year ago, the people had been on the move all of them there, big and small. They laid their hands on their axes and made such a stir that all the world heard about it. True, many of them died, because the boyars would not take it lying down, either, and called for cavalry and guns to keep them quiet. But when the authorities saw how much blood was being shed they took pity on the people, and ordered that the boyars and peasants must stop fighting. "We'll make peace and justice between you!" they said. Everybody listened and calmed down again and went back home. And then the authorities started chopping bits off the land of the boyars and giving them to the peasants, so that they should have some, too.'

The carriage fell into a heavy silence. The electric bulb, which had lit automatically, swayed continuously, making weird shadows, now here, now there. Then several peasants sighed. Petre Petre, who had not opened his mouth once, now muttered, a flame glittering in his eyes: 'Then unless we, too, lay our hands on our axes we won't . . .'

He paused suddenly, as if the words had sprung from his soul without his intending it. The men heard him, but not one of them turned towards him. Lupu Chirițoiu alone murmured softly: 'Shut up, Petrică, shut up!'

Once again silence fell. The metal wheels boomed dully like the echo of a distant bell. In the dark windows streamers of smoke twisted, carrying thousands of twinkling little sparks. A timid echo of the old man's voice hung in the stuffy air of the carriage, between the naked light from the bulbs and the moving shadows. 'Shut up, Petrică, shut up!'

Chapter Six

THE HARBINGERS

I

Platamonu was very concerned to see his loyal steward, Chirilă Păun, so downcast.

'What's the matter? What's come over you, 'Chirilă?'

The steward gave him a black look, and answered: 'Well, master, you should know best; after all, it's your son . . .'

'Bless my soul, what's my son done to you, Chirilă?' the leaseholder asked in a puzzled voice.

'May he get what he deserves from the Lord, if not from men,' said the peasant miserably. 'He's done me a terrible injury and brought great shame upon my head; I would never have thought anything like this could happen – after all, I've served you faithfully!'

Platamonu was confounded. Ever since Chirilă and his daughter had come to the manor, the leaseholder had been afraid that Aristide might tamper with the girl. He had spoken to his son about her, and still it had happened. How could he make up for it? In an attempt to make matters less tragic, he gave the steward a friendly slap on the shoulder saying: 'Well, well, Chirilă, don't take it so hard. That's how it is with young people – it's happened before, and the world still goes on. We'll think about it and see what . . .'

'No, master!' the steward exclaimed, drawing back offended. 'I know you don't care about it, it doesn't hurt you. But what shall we do with our girl? Can we marry her with her belly up to her chin, or with the babe in her arms and the talk of the village?'

'Chirilă, Chirilă, take it easy!' Platamonu interrupted hesitantly, for the sake of saying something.

'It's happened now, sir!' said the peasant. 'God is above, he sees and he will judge. You will have to look for another man, because I shan't be working for you any more. People told me that the Evil One lived in this place, but I wouldn't listen to them. May the Lord recompense you; as to us, we'll settle accounts another time!'

Platamonu was startled at the bitterness and the boldness with

which Chirilă, who had always been so meek, confronted him to-day.

He rushed off to find his son, who, after having been in Bucharest for a month without presenting himself for any examination, had returned home.

'What trouble you've brought on me, my boy!' he cried, showing more feeling in front of the guilty youth than he had towards the peasant. 'You couldn't leave Chirilă's daughter in peace either, and now . . .'

'Oh come, father, don't be so tragic!' Aristide replied in a superior manner. 'Gherghina's a pretty girl. After all, I can't run after the scarecrows in the village!'

'That's all very well, but . . .'

Platamonu sought to object with fear in his voice, but nevertheless soothed inwardly by his son's confidence.

'I know, I know', the young man interrupted. 'Gherghina has already come crying to me about it. I told her clearly enough what to do; I offered her some money too, because it doesn't cost much, but she wouldn't. Now whose fault is it that everybody will know about it, and that she will be left with her shame? If she had listened to me, not even her mother would have found out about it, and everything would have been all right. Of course, in spite of all this you'll have to see about the whole affair later on, and eventually spend some money too, to make it up with Chirilă and the girl. But you'll find a way to do it, because you're clever, and know how to deal with the peasants!'

'Of course!' answered the lease-holder, recovering. 'We mustn't exaggerate. Still, it would have been better if things hadn't reached this stage. Oh well . . .'

Chirilă Păun seethed with anguish. When his wife had told him what had happened to the girl he had beaten them both. Then he had been sorry. He felt himself the more guilty because, prompted by his greed to earn more, he had entered the service of the Greek, although he had known the ways of the family.

Nevertheless, he felt the need to get things off his chest, especially when he had returned to Amara. In a couple of days the whole village would hear about it. How would he be able to show his face among the people? He went to Nicodim, the priest, told him everything, complained and asked for advice. The old priest was also downcast; after his sight had deteriorated, his hearing had begun to fail him. When he understood what it was all about, however, he was amazed, crossed himself, and called his daughter: 'Did you hear, Niculina, what has happened to poor Chirilă with the Greek's son?'

Niculina was disgusted, cursed the Greek, and called her husband.

'Filip, do you know what a dirty trick the Greek's son, the student, has played on Chirilă?'

Her husband listened in silence, nodded to express his indignation and enquired ponderously: 'What d'you think of doing now, Chirilă?'

'That's why I came to Father Nicodim, to get his advice; I just don't know what to do,' the peasant answered with downcast eyes.

'Well!' Filip said and, after a long pause, repeated in the same grave tone. 'Well!'

Chirilă returned home without any advice, but feeling nevertheless relieved, as if his soul had been lightened by imparting his troubles to others and hearing the Greek cursed. Towards evening he called on Dragoş, the teacher. Gherghina's story was already known there – in fact, by now it was all over the village, even having reached the ears of boyar Miron, who, deeply disgusted, remarked in front of Isbăşescu and the steward, Bumbu: 'You see? That's the sort of dirty business they're up to, and then we wonder why the peasants are grumbling and agitating!'

A heated discussion was going on in the Dragoş family, precisely because of the probable arrival of Chirilă. Nicolae, the teacher's brother, had heard about it already from Smaranda's Petre, whom he had met in the street. He was ready to burst with rage. It was some time now since he had first said that either he would marry Gherghina or nobody, for he would never find another girl like her.

'You see how wise you were not to hurry!' his sister-in-law Florica said.

'On the contrary, if you had married her when you fell in love with her, the poor girl wouldn't have fallen into the clutches of that Greek swine!' the teacher said compassionately.

Nicolae, boiling with fury and cursing, finally asked his brother to help Chirilă, as it was impossible to let such an outrage go unpunished. Florica jumped in immediately: 'Ionel, listen to me – don't you interfere; whenever you've paid attention to what I've said, everything's been all right, but when you haven't, we've only had trouble. Everyone should look after his own worries; after all, it wasn't you who advised Chirilă to go into service with Platamonu, he went of his own free will. He got mixed up in it on his own, now let him get out of it on his own.'

Chirilă Păun arrived just as Florica was lighting the lamp; the discussion had become less heated by this time, and they had started to talk about other matters. They listened to Chirilă with deep attention, and then Florica, who was always worrying about what her husband would do, said almost coldly: 'It's a nasty business, Uncle Chirilă! You should have been more careful: you knew what a ladykiller the lease-holder's son was!'

'I know, it couldn't be worse!' the peasant agreed, looking sadly into her eyes. 'If one knew beforehand what dangers lay ahead, one would be forewarned, but as it is . . .'

'You were so greedy that you went to work for the Greek, and now you've paid for it with Gherghina!' muttered Nicolae accusingly.

'All right, then, you needn't keep on at me about it, the Lord has punished me enough!' Chirilă answered bitterly. 'Once I knew that Gherghina was in love with you, I didn't watch her so closely, because I relied on you too!'

'Don't worry. I shan't rest until I've gelded that young Greek!' he exclaimed, grinding his teeth. Unable to stand any more of the conversation he left the room.

Chirilă Păun stayed until the evening meal was ready, and departed, more at ease. Any word of consolation now was like balm on a fresh wound to him.

From now on, he told Gherghina's story to everybody he met in the street. The mayor urged him to be patient; perhaps matters would turn out all right in the end. Luca Talabă, having sympathized with him a little, began to cross-examine him about the lease-holder; how much had the Greek offered for Babaroaga, and how much had the lady asked?

Only Trifon Guju gave a morose response when Chirilă met him and told him about it: 'Well, Uncle Chirilă, at least you have a barn full to bursting; I've been struggling since Epiphany with a house full of children and not a grain of maize.'

'You're right, Trifon!' Chirilă answered. 'Everyone has his troubles.'

'When you've got a full belly, the troubles seem a bit easier!' Guju muttered.

He even got hold of Pantelimon Țădava, who had obtained two days leave from the army, and told him about Gherghina. The boy was now a soldier and in uniform, which suited him very well, and was behaving like the very soul of virtue so as to avoid detention, which would prevent him from coming home. He was in a continual state of anxiety lest Domnica should forget him, and marry before he had finished his service.

Smaranda's Petre was continually postponing the date of his marriage to Irina's Marioara, who was in service at the Iuga manor. He had loved her for a long time, but did not dare to marry because of his poverty. Now, after this business of Gherghina's, he had another talk with his mother, who highly approved of her son's plans. She had been prodding him for a long time—if he had listened to her, he would have been settled down by now. The next day Smaranda started negotiations with Marioara's mother

and her aunt Profira. Chirilă happened to meet Petre right in the middle of these proceedings, and when he told him how he had been served at the lease-holder's, the young man answered between his teeth: 'Well, Uncle Chirilă, I wouldn't forgive him, even if they took my life for it!'

'You're right, Petrică, very right!' Chirilă agreed humbly.

2

One day Belciug, the priest from Pripas, appeared in Titu's office. He was well-dressed; both his cassock and the winter coat he wore on top were new. His beard was neatly cut – in short, he was as spick and span as any suitor come to ask for the hand of the bride. Titu had never seen him like this at home.

'I've taken my stipend for the next six months, and I've come!' the priest said. 'I've always been afraid that the Lord might call me before I had seen our country!' A shy smile spread over his joyful face. 'I arrived this morning, and came here from the hotel, so that I might not get lost before I knew my way about town!'

Titu's father, with an eye to the prestige of his offspring, had told the priest to look for him at the newspaper offices, where he would be sure of finding him, rather than at home. Young Herdelea introduced Belciug to the editorial secretary, and then the two of them left for a walk round the town centre, so as to be able to talk at their ease. The priest must tell the young man everything, big or small, that had happened in Amaradia, particularly about Ghighița's wedding. His mother had written something about it, it was true, but not in such detail as he would have liked.

Titu became Belciug's guide in Bucharest. First of all he took the priest to the statue of Michael the Brave⁹, where Belciug crossed himself with deep emotion and then, on the young man's suggestion, took a keepsake to show the folk at home – a withered leaf from a wreath which had been hanging on one of the points of the little iron fence placed round the base. Then they visited several churches and museums and went into a number of large stores. The visitor was not lucky with the Chamber and Senate, where he happened to hear only everyday, monotonous debates, without any important speeches, but nevertheless he liked it, as he did everything he heard and saw. It was impossible that it should be otherwise, after having come so far and spent so much. And then there was the National Theatre; after he had been twice with Titu, the priest went almost every night, he had become so fond of it.

After a fortnight, Titu's company was no longer necessary, and

neither did Belciug want to take up young Herdelea's time. He had discovered several old acquaintances, including a clerk at the post office and a chemist, both of whom had been schoolfellows of his in Amaradia. Naturally, Titu had introduced him to the Gavrilaş family, and he even had lunch with them two or three times, delighted with the culinary arts of the plump Mrs Gavrilaş, and congratulating Titu on his good fortune in finding such cooking.

Titu himself, much as he had enjoyed taking round the priest from his village, was not sorry to let Belciug manage on his own; quite apart from the fact that the whole business had cost him some money. He had been obliged at times to have his meals in town with the priest, paying for himself, for it did not occur to Belciug to do the honours; in fact, the priest would have been quite happy to accept them from Titu. The work at the newspaper, too, had been neglected, so that Roşu had commented that Titu was getting to be like all the others.

Only a couple of days after the priest's arrival, a most unfortunate incident had occurred, which might have had very unpleasant repercussions, for if it had reached Belciug's ears the whole of Amaradia would have been buzzing with it.

Tanţa came to see Titu more and more often; when Mrs Alexandrescu was out, of course. It was in vain that the young man tried to persuade her to be more prudent, she answered that she cared about nothing and nobody, because she loved him. Titu had a guilty conscience about her, and did not like to go so far as to point out that the other tenants, or Madame Lenuţa, might notice something, and then there would be a scandal, and his fears were soon proved to be justified. There was also the fact that his pupil, Marioara Rădulescu, sensed something, and even tried to catch the couple out. Fortunately, however, one day when he went to eat with the Gavrilaş family, Marioara was absent, and the good woman indignantly explained that she had thrown the young lady out; she had caught her in the street talking to and kissing an elderly gentleman 'almost as old as Gavrilaş'. She complained that this girl, whom she had spoilt and coddled like her own child, had turned out no better than she should be. True, she had noticed that the girl eyed the men, but she had told herself that this was natural, after all, the child was not going to be a nun. But to go around with old dotards, and in the street, meant that it was in her blood to be promiscuous.

'I don't know how she behaved with you, Mr Titu', Mrs Gavrilaş concluded gloomily, 'but please don't be angry because I sent her away. The world is full of wenches like her.'

A few evenings later Titu, having parted with Belciug, hurried home to receive Tanţa, who had told him the previous day that

she would be coming, as Jean and Mrs Alexandrescu were again due for a prolonged session at poker. The young couple spent two passionate hours, and then Titu lit a candle, so that Tanța might dress, and not be too late. The girl, reluctant to leave the warm bed, stretched herself luxuriously and purred drowsily like a soft, spoiled kitten. Watching her, Titu wanted to delay her, but controlled his ardour for her sake, so that she should not have to face any friction at home. Tanța, however, oblivious of any consequences, enticed him further, telling him laughingly: 'I want to see how much you love me, Titușor!'

'Why d'you lead me on, and don't let me behave myself?' Titu murmured. 'You know very well that it is only for your sake that I'm behaving myself - otherwise I wouldn't let you go till tomorrow morning!'

'Then I'll stay till tomorrow morning!' she said, letting herself fall back again, and pulling the quilt over her. 'Put out the light and . . .'

Titu leant across to embrace her, but she resisted him: 'No, no, no - let me go; I was only joking! Titu . . .'

'It's too late now!' the young man exclaimed ardently. 'You shan't go until . . .'

At that moment a discreet knock was heard at the door. Both of them were struck dumb, frozen in a half-embrace. After some seconds of silence, during which Tanța hid herself under the quilt up to the chin, her eyes filled with horror, Titu approached the door on tiptoe, his finger to his lips so that she should make no sound. He asked hoarsely: 'Who is it?'

'It's me, it's me, don't put yourself out, just one second, will you?' came the answer from the parlour.

Titu was so beside himself that he did not recognize the voice. Tanța, however, frantically shook her head, whispering to Titu, who looked at her in amazement: 'Jenică . . .'

Young Herdelea, having grasped who it was, became even more confused, and enquired: 'Is it you, Mr Jean? What is it, what's happened?'

'Nothing, nothing, just open the door a moment, if you don't mind!' Jenică persisted from outside.

Titu was horrified; he looked pleadingly at Tanța, who, with sudden decision, disappeared altogether beneath the quilt, still whispering as she did so: 'Hide my clothes!'

He hastily collected her garments, which had been flung on to the chairs, and her chemise, which was on the floor near the bed, and concealed them by the cupboard, muttering as he did so, to justify the delay: 'Yes, yes, right away, only let me . . . One minute! I was in bed and . . .'

He unlocked the door, and Jenică entered, smiling: 'Excuse me for coming so unceremoniously, but . . . Are you alone?'

'Of course, who could be here?' enquired young Herdelea hesitantly.

'I just wondered, because I heard some voices, and that's why I knocked. I came to take some things from Lenuța's room and . . .'

As he spoke, he gazed round the room, intrigued and unconvinced. He had come without Mrs Alexandrescu's knowledge, having left her at his parent's absorbed in an interesting game. His excuse had been a slight headache, and a desire to go out into the street for some fresh air, so as not to stuff himself with aspirin. A month ago he had been introduced to the daughter of his Assistant Director at the Ministry; a pleasant girl and an only child with a dowry. The young lady had seemed to take a liking to him, and he, on their third meeting, had hinted that he had serious intentions. It would be a brilliant match, enhanced by the fact that it would mean influential connections in his career. The Assistant Director was a pillar of the Ministry. After making sure of the young lady's feelings, he had consulted his parents, but very secretly, so that it might not reach Tanța's ears, for she might unwittingly let a word fall to Lenuța. They had been delighted. To avoid having a row with Mrs Alexandrescu, he was stealthily removing his things little by little, and then one day his father, old Ionescu, would present himself to Lenuța, and, speaking for him, explain everything to her and persuade her to leave him alone. He had just rushed in to take some more things. He had entered the other room, but had not been able to find any matches, and his own had been left with Lenuța, who had placed the matchbox on her stake money to bring her luck. Annoyed, he had been feeling his way towards the door to return empty-handed, when he had heard voices in the room of the tenant. For a moment he had hesitated. How could he bother a young man who might have a woman with him? But then he had thought what a shame it would be to have come in vain, just because he had no matches. And after all, Titu had been alone! As he spoke, his eyes wandered round and round the room until they alighted on the table, where, next to the candle, there lay a little black felt hat, like a patch of shadow. He interrupted himself, and, looking at the hat out of the corner of his eye, said insinuatingly: 'Casanova!'

At being thus caught, Titu became furious. 'My dear fellow, don't you think you go too far? I jumped up. I opened the door to you, and that's enough! Tell me what you want, and . . .'

But Jean's curiosity was too much for him. Where could the lady have disappeared? He answered, while his eyes searched every corner: 'Some matches!'

Titu sat on the edge of the bed and said impatiently, pointing to the matches on the bedside locker: 'Please, and . . .'

'Thank you, *mon cher*, and don't be cross because . . . Here I go, you see!'

He approached the locker, but as he stretched out his hand towards the matches, it appeared to him that the quilt bulged in a certain place. Picking up the matchbox, he said merrily: 'Here we are, after all! Two lovebirds! You know, it never even occurred to me that . . . But no, no, I shan't bother you! Here I go! Don't make such a face at me. I'm quite a discreet young man you know, and I'll let you continue . . .'

As he approached the door, he added gallantly: 'Excuse me for bothering you, madam!'

Laughing, he opened the door, but then asked Titu, fluttering his eyelashes: 'Just one more thing, tell me, you young rake, is she pretty?'

The tension in the atmosphere was so strong that Titu was torn between fury and the need for patience. At one and the same moment he was telling himself that he should take Jean by the scruff of the neck and fling him out, and that he had behaved very foolishly in opening the door and letting him in. He wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible, and turned his head away contemptuously without answering. Jean came back again towards him: 'Why have you got so cross, *mon cher*? After all, I haven't eaten this . . .'

He now stood at the bedside, and his curiosity proved too much for him. With a lightning movement, he lifted the corner of the quilt, half revealing Tanța, and ending his sugary sentence: ' . . . this charming young lady!'

As he recognized his sister, however, the smile of curiosity on his face froze into a grimace of amazement. Recovering himself after a moment, he continued reproachfully: 'So you are the charming young lady, are you? Well, my congratulations! Really, it suits you perfectly! You should be ashamed of yourself!'

Titu leaped to his feet, but did not know what to do. He felt obliged to interfere, although he realized that such intervention would be somewhat stogy and unfitting to the circumstances.

'Please, sir, do . . .'

'She is my sister, and I have the right to take her by the scruff of the neck if I feel so inclined!' said Jean, ponderously. Titu thought this remark as out of place as his own.

Then Tanța said, with the utmost composure: 'Now listen, Jenică, I don't ask you to teach me morals! I never have, nor never will! That's settled. So it would be better if you looked after your . . . Lenuța, and left us alone!'

Her cool determination disconcerted her brother, who now lost his temper. Muttering something, he replaced the matches on the bedside locker and finally, with simulated superiority, announced: 'We'll talk about that later! Now, put on your clothes at once and off home with you! At once! I shan't move from here till you go!'

Tanța answered contemptuously: 'I will leave when I think fit; you know very well that your instructions make no impression on me at all, none whatsoever!'

'Really? And you have the impertinence to oppose me?' Jean burst out, thus stumbling on a pretext to make a dignified withdrawal. 'Very well, stay here and carry on with your orgy! Don't worry, you'll pay for it!'

Titu, dazed, closed the door after him. Tanța then added with a forced smile: 'The idiot left the door open, and now the room is cold!'

Nevertheless, she quickly put on her clothes. Titu wanted to say a few heart-warming or at least loving words; but he was afraid of sounding ridiculous. Tanța, however, was as calm as if nothing had happened. Young Herdelea was amazed at her composure and self-possession. He was certain that Jean would make a scandal. What he did not know, and Tanța did not explain to him, was that she had a basis for her confidence. Her mother had told her about Jenica's plan to leave Lenuța, and her brother would learn that she was aware of his secret, therefore, he would not dare say anything about her, for fear that she should in turn betray him, too.

'Do you love me, Titușor?' she asked, pressing her body against him when they parted.

'So much, my very lovely darling!' he answered in a trembling voice.

For two days Herdelea was on tenterhooks, awaiting an avalanche at any moment. He did not encounter Jean, and received no news from Tanța, while Mrs Alexandrescu twittered on about matters of the heart as always. He was just beginning to think that everything was going to be all right when, three days later, Mrs Alexandrescu called him. He found her alone and melancholy: 'You see what you've done, Mr Titu? Jenică has told me about it; only me, because he doesn't want to make his poor parents miserable. Really, Mr Titu, how could you? To take advantage of an innocent angel! I would never have thought you would do such a thing! I thought Transylvanians were proper, well-conducted people, and now I see that . . . I introduced you to her family with the noblest of intentions, not to make the innocent child an object of disgrace. Now what are you going to do? If anything were to happen, and the old man were to find out – and I know how sensitive he is about the honour of his family – he would shoot you!'

Young Herdelea knew well the answer his landlady was waiting for, but he was unable to give it. He declared that he loved Tanța, and that their love was not just a passing thing, and then relapsed into muttering something about the insecurity of his position, and his hopes for the future, when their love could be sealed. However, Mrs Alexandrescu did not, as he had feared, press the matter. She was first of all interested in Jenică, and the latter had forbidden her to receive Tanța as long as Titu was her tenant. For Jean's sake, therefore, Titu's landlady asked him to look for a lodging elsewhere; the end of the month was drawing near, too. As a matter of fact, even without this development she would not have kept him any more, because Mimi might need the room. She had not wanted to mention it, not even to Jenică, but a couple of days ago Mimi's husband had caught her coming out of the apartment of one of her old flames, and now they were discussing the divorce. Vasile had declared that he would never forgive Mimi, and would send her packing if she did not go of her own accord.

Within two days Titu had found a better room for himself, at the same price, in Strada Imprimeriei, near *Drapelul*, and more central. The Gavrilaș couple had had misunderstandings with some tenants and had also decided to move a month ago, only postponing it because of young Herdelea. They had now discovered a suitable apartment in the same street. When Titu took Belciug to see his new room, the latter said: 'Thank God you got out of that other place, my dear young poet! I didn't at all like that old lady, painted up like a theatre woman. All she did was to screech and wriggle and ogle as if she were on heat. Beware of such women; they must be very dangerous!'

3

'What shall we do with the peasants, Master Miron? They don't want to renew the old contracts, and they are even threatening me!' complained Cosma Buruiană, wringing his hands. 'I wouldn't bother you with all these things, but these people are a danger to us, Master Miron. Either they've gone mad, or God knows what has taken possession of their souls. I've never known them to be so stubborn as they are now!'

Miron Iuga had at last forgiven the lease-holder for his blunder with the maize last autumn, and now pitied him, but could not refrain from remarking: 'Be careful that you don't imagine things, as you did with the theft!'

Cosma humbly crossed himself, saying: 'Oh, Master Miron, let it be! I've paid enough for that! Frofa Christmas onwards not a

night has passed without a theft but I haven't even dared to come and tell you, I just suffered it. But now things are very serious!

He went on to report that the peasants were saying among themselves that although they would come to terms with the boyars they would not go to work unless Babaroaga were divided up between them, for the estate meant nothing to the lady, who wanted to sell it to other boyars. They said that they would not go on without land that they sweated blood in working it, and so it must be theirs because that was how the king and many of the boyars wanted to be. They said that only those in power were against it, and kept them waiting with their hearts in their mouths. The lease-holder had heard all this from the more loyal servants, therefore it must be true.

'If it really is as you say,' the old man answered, 'this is the result of demagoguery! But I wonder why haven't I heard anything about these things yet?

'Because they wouldn't dare to tell you, Master Miron,' said Cosma, 'they're afraid and ashamed!'

Iuga did not hurry with the contracts, because he was planning to make some changes which he thought would suit both himself and the peasants. In fact, he had concluded agreements with some of the villagers last autumn, so that continuity of work on the land was guaranteed. He sent for Bumbu, the steward, who said that people had spoken to him, too, about changes, and even some of those who had concluded contracts last autumn, had said that they would not work unless the contracts were set right. But when Miron Iuga looked at him enquiringly, the steward, frightened, added that the peasants spoke like that and became restless before every spring, and then, since they had no choice, came to terms and started work.

'Wait a minute, Leonte, you take things too easily!' said the worried lease-holder. 'It's true, people did talk that way at other times, but it has never been like it is now! After all, I know the peasants too, and am living among them.'

'We've still got plenty of time,' said Bumbu, more hesitantly, 'the rime of the snow hasn't been washed away from the soil yet.'

Old Iuga did not want to show that he was concerned, although he did not at all like what he heard. Of course the lease-holder, timid and whining as he was by nature, exaggerated things. But it would do no harm to take precautions. He therefore ordered the steward to start concluding the contracts the very next day, and to finish with all of them within a week. He relinquished the idea of making the changes he had planned. If the villagers were upset, they might well consider the new provisions too heavy.

Three days later Leonte Bumbu told the boyar that no peasant had signed an agreement, and that all of them wanted to ask him

to make the terms easier because they could not possibly manage under the old conditions.

On the afternoon of the same day, Dragoș the teacher presented himself. He had been to the manor twice since Christmas to discuss school matters. Miron received him kindly, remembering the pleasant surprise Dragoș had prepared for him with the carols, and reproaching himself for having previously formed too harsh an opinion from possibly superficial appearances when, after all, the teacher was a mature and serious man. Although he was annoyed just now at what the steward had told him, and did not feel like talking, it seemed useful to do so; through Dragoș he might be able to influence the village, and thus re-establish the old order and calm. He invited his visitor to sit down, and offered him the traditional *dulceață*, enquiring about the school. Ion Dragoș was a little pale, his face revealed strong emotion, and his hands trembled.

'I've just been talking, I haven't asked you what wind has brought you', said Miron finally in a friendly manner. 'You start first, because then I have something to say!'

The teacher became paler, placed his hands on his knees, and tapped nervously with his fingers.

He observed that Iuga's face darkened as soon as he uttered the first words. This, however, instead of intimidating him, gave him more strength, and impelled him to continue more calmly and confidently.

'Will you tell me what you actually came for?' interrupted the old man, suddenly.

This intervention did not disturb Dragoș in the least. He continued to explain that he personally wanted nothing, but that he had taken the liberty of coming to tell Iuga of the suffering in the village, simply because the peasants were disturbed because of their hunger and poverty. They still saw in Miron Iuga their protector, from whom they hoped to obtain an easing of the burden that weighed upon them. The terms of the present contracts were so heavy that they could no longer be borne. Most of the people had starved during the winter because of these terms. By a relatively insignificant sacrifice, the lives of all of them could be bettered.

'In whose name are you speaking?' Iuga enquired.

'In the name of the villagers, Mr Iuga,' said Dragoș simply.

'Did they empower you to come and convey their woes?'

'No, nobody has empowered me, Mr Iuga, but I felt myself obliged to do so, because they have come to me and told me their troubles, and . . .'

'Then say no more,' exclaimed the old man severely. 'I don't need your mediation to find out the desires of my people! Mediators of your type only bring misery to the villagers. Instead of enlightening

the people, you poison their hearts, encourage their every dissatisfaction, exploiting them to create prestige and popularity for yourself. Well, my first impressions never deceive me. I knew your worth and judged you accordingly at the time I made the mistake of bringing you into the village to disturb the life of these poor people!

'Please believe, Mr Iuga, that I . . .' the teacher mumbled, with an involuntarily humble smile.

Miron was annoyed at the eternal 'Mr Iuga', which seemed to him to be an insult. His words became more edged: 'Enough! I don't deal with uninvited go-betweens!'

'My conscience told me to do my duty, and I've done it!' muttered Dragoş wearily. 'You will decide as you think best. But you said that you too wanted to tell me something.'

'No, no,' exclaimed Iuga, 'I have nothing else to say to you. Others should talk to you!'

He turned his back, and the teacher withdrew noiselessly.

When he had been on his way to the manor, his heart had beaten violently, and his mouth and throat had been dry with emotion. In his mind he had arranged everything he wanted to tell boyar Miron. Everything had been clear, lucid and convincing. It was impossible that it should not be understood and approved. This was an exceptional situation, with exceptional and imminent dangers, which he felt, saw and heard. To have hidden all this within himself would have been disloyal towards the man who, by a gesture, could do away with the miasma filling the air, and re-establish confidence and patience until a lasting solution was found.

He now left, disappointed with himself, not with Miron Iuga, and cursing his inability to convince the boyar of facts which seemed so clear in his own mind. On being transformed into phrases, things which made his heart bleed had seemed cool, petty and unimportant. It was not even surprising, therefore, that Iuga had received them without understanding.

Dragoş emerged from the manor with the same humble smile frozen on his face. He walked with great care, leaning on his umbrella as on a stick, avoiding the mud and the puddles, and keeping to the side. From mother Ioana's yard, the voice of mad Anton called him: 'Mr Nică, stop, don't run away!'

As soon as winter started, Anton had found himself a crib at mother Ioana's, who cursed him but put up with him. The teacher went on his way. But Anton came up from behind, barefoot and agitated: 'Why do you run away, Mr Nică? Because you've been to the old boyar? Don't be ashamed or sorry for it, for Doomsday and the Day of Atonement are at hand, and those who have stood with their arms folded shall pay the price. When those riding on

white stallions arrive with the great news, then you will rise and shout that . . .'

At that moment, mother Ioana's voice was heard calling: 'Chick . . . chick . . . chickabiddy. Chickabiddy . . . chick, chick . . .'

The madman suddenly stopped short and turned, as if the call were for him, muttering humbly: 'Wait a minute, mother Ioana!'

Ion Dragoş heard his bare feet slapping through the mud, fading into the distance, while the voice of the old woman called: 'Chicka-biddy, chick . . . chick . . .'

4

One morning, a couple of days after he had moved, as he entered the office, Titu found Roşu very downcast.

'You see, I was right, my dear boy!' he exclaimed, with a bitter gesture. 'Now what do you say, eh?'

Young Herdelea did not know what the secretary was so right about; everywhere and in everything he habitually found that he was right. He answered with a vague, confirmatory smile. Roşu persisted: 'I suppose you've read the morning papers, haven't you? But what they report in the newspapers is a fleabite compared to reality. The Ministry of the Interior only passes harmless bulletins. Oh yes! But the fact, my dear boy, is . . .'

He concluded with a gesture intended to express the maximum patriotic anxiety. As young Herdelea remained unmoved and uncomprehending, the secretary continued mysteriously: 'The *danse macabre* has started, and our boyars are losing their heads! Now let us see how our nice Mr Deliceanu will twist it round, I drew his attention long ago to . . .'

Only after a quarter of an hour of circumlocution did young Herdelea grasp that Roşu was talking about certain peasant disturbances which had broken out somewhere in Moldavia. Small reports and news items about them had appeared in the last few days in all the newspapers, but without being given the importance attached to them by the editorial secretary of *Drapelul*. Much more was being rumoured in town, but with a certain satisfaction, and without any fear. Young Herdelea endeavoured to calm Roşu by putting forward the explanation he had heard everywhere, that it all arose from some small retribution meted out to a number of Jews who had ruthlessly exploited the poor peasants in the Moldavian villages.

'Nobody will regret the disappearance of a few Jewish side-whiskers,' Titu said, smiling. 'That's the only way the villages can get rid of them, they have multiplied too fast, anyway!'

The secretary leapt to his feet as if he had been stung: 'Bravo, my dear fellow, that's what I wanted to hear! This is the mentality which leads the country to the brink of the precipice – this hooliganism which sees the Jews as the cause of all the evils. Still, I would agree even with barbarity against Jews if you could guarantee that thereby the great calamity hanging over us could be avoided! But can you tell exactly where this operation with the Jewish side-whiskers will end? Are you certain that tomorrow, or the day after, the peasants will not continue their operations on the beards of the boyars and the Christian lease-holders?'

Titu now remembered that Roşu was Jewish and was sorry to have made a cheap witticism in front of him, injuring his natural racial susceptibilities. In order to atone for his mistake, he hastily agreed with everything Roşu said, underlining it with an occasional: 'Of course', or 'Obviously'. The secretary tried to convince him that this was how all revolutions started, with a disturbance which nobody considered important. This was a warning.

'But look. What is happening now, my friend? In these events in Moldavia, people only see an agitation against the Jews, and, as you said just now, what does it matter if a few Jews get beaten up? Let them be beaten up. It's a safety-valve. By beating up the Jews, the peasants will cool down, and forget about the other boyars and lease-holders, who are not Jews, but exploit them just as much. Don't imagine I'm making this up. Read the press! It's written everywhere, sometimes openly, sometimes just insinuated – the atrocities rebellious peasants are committing are justified with the "Down with the Jews" slogan. They say that there's a sacred cause behind all this, and of course there is, because the cause of the peasantry is sacred and just. And yet, instead of seeking honest solutions to alleviate the poverty of the peasants, they continue to add fuel to the fire. Very well, I don't say anything about the opposition, it's an opposition after all, and will profit by every chance, even a catastrophe, in order to get into power. If at least the government behaved intelligently, but no, far from it! It behaves even worse than the opposition, for it does nothing at all; it has lost its head, or else doesn't realize what is really happening. The fact is that it's spreading, and nobody takes any steps to restore order. That's why the situation is so serious!'

Roşu continually unhooked his spectacles from behind his ears and wiped them carefully, replacing them and continuing with increasing vehemence, intent on convincing young Herdelea at any cost, as if on his conviction depended the stilling of all threats. Titu was convinced that the secretary's eloquence had been unleashed more especially by his unfortunate remark and felt himself obliged to listen with resignation, although an unread letter in

Tanța's writing which he had just received from the porter was burning a hole in his pocket. Fortunately Antimiu, a fat, perspiring reporter in a greasy fur coat and with an imitation otter-skin *căciulă* on the back of his head, wearing a grave expression as if he were in possession of all supreme state secrets, arrived on the scene. Without giving Herdelea so much as a nod, he plumped himself down into a chair near the secretary's desk, and said heaving a sigh: 'Uncle Roșu, these disturbances are taking a nasty turn. The Council of Ministers has been convened for the afternoon to call up the reservists!'

The secretary pointed a triumphant finger at Titu: 'What did I tell you, dear sir? Did you hear that? The reservists!'

Antimiu began to write his story, but Roșu stopped him, remarking bitterly: 'Announce only the meeting of the Council of Ministers. The rest cannot be written in *Drapelul*. Such is our miserable fate. When we have sensational news, we must bite our nails and enviously watch *Adevărul* publishing it.'

Within a couple of moments, Deliceanu himself appeared from his editorial office, a freshly shaven, thin, frail figure. Without his habitual smile, he looked older.

'Come on Roșu, you take it down; you're quickest,' the editor said. 'I am going to dictate an item, which in fact is an official statement . . . Ready? Right! "In connection with the alarmist news which has been appearing for several days in certain newspapers, we have been informed by authoritative sources that complete calm reigns throughout the country, and that the public has no reason for concern. The small, strictly local incidents which have occurred are due to certain ill-intentioned agitation. It should be added that the government is firm in its determination to maintain order, using every legal means at its disposal whatsoever against any person!" That's all! Read it back!'

Roșu did so, and the editor said approvingly: 'Yes! Place it at the head of the political reports, across two columns, in twelve point bold!'

As he prepared to leave, the secretary enquired: 'Shall we print anything about the reservists? He's just brought it in now.'

'No, no!' answered Deliceanu. 'Leave only the statement! As a matter of fact the business with the reservists isn't certain yet. It remains to be seen whether the Council of Ministers will decide upon that or something else.'

Titu Herdelea took advantage of the situation to withdraw to a distant table and read his letter. Only now did Tanța know that he had moved. Jenică had not told her parents, but was spying upon her and threatening her with a scandal if she went to Mrs Alexandrescu's. She had many things to tell Titu, she longed for

him and wanted to see him. He should leave his new address with the porter in an envelope, and she would come without fail. Herdelea concealed the letter, and wrote his address on a scrap of paper, with no name. He also longed for her, for her gentle voice and her spell-binding eyes. In vain had he rejoiced at moving from Mrs Alexandrescu's, he had not escaped, for Tanța remained in his heart, whence he could not tear her, however necessary it might seem that they should part. Her absence pained and inspired him. Every night he poured out his longing in burning verse, which he left unpolished, for he did not write for publication, but to ease his heart.

After Deliceanu and the reporter had left, Roșu resumed his explanation, now intermingled with sarcasm because of the statement, which denied the terrible reality. Young Herdelea pretended to listen, but the words went in one ear and out of the other like meaningless sound. Only Tanța was in his mind. He thought of adding a time to the address, to indicate that he would be waiting for her. But what if she did not come at that hour? So, instead of the hour, he added: 'I love you'.

He sighed with relief upon leaving the office. At last the talk about the disturbances had ended. It seemed to him that they were just one more form of the eternal subject under discussion here: the peasant question. It was the habit of the country to continually discuss the most serious problems without doing anything about them. By talking, people got the illusion that they were fulfilling their duty: the important thing was talk, and not action, especially if talking revealed all the horrors.

At lunch, Gavrilaș, too entertained him with conversation about the disturbances. He had heard some nasty things from the police. A town was said to have been plundered by insurgent peasants, and people were talking about a general mobilization. In the afternoon, Titu met Belciug, the priest, who was most concerned: 'I think I chose the wrong moment to visit this country. Such sad things can be heard, though I don't know how true they are. At the hotel the porter told me that some Jews had come from Moldavia talking about terrible atrocities.'

'People in these parts talk like that, Father!' answered Titu, with a confidence beneath which even he began to feel some anxiety. 'They like to make a mountain out of a mole-hill. Maybe there is something in it, but not at all that they say.'

'I'm wondering whether it wouldn't be wise to go quietly home, so as not to be caught here by a revolution or even by a war. Supposing – God forbid! – the borders are closed and the trains stopped!'

'Get away with you – don't talk such nonsense!' said young Herdelea, but with a heavy heart. 'Do you think this country is

so evil, Father? Set your mind at rest, and don't listen to all this chatter!

The next day he bumped into Grigore Iuga at *Drapelul*. They had not seen each other for some two weeks. Grigore had come to find out what was true out of all the contradictory reports which were going round. At the club, everything was said according to the colour of one's party. Even people whom everybody knew to be close friends of Ministers either knew nothing for certain or were deliberately hiding the truth. Grigore had not been in Amara since Christmas, both because of the divorce and for other reasons. But if there were any danger, he would consider himself obliged to stay in the country at his father's side.

'I think the newspapers know the truth, although they write lies,' he said, with a forced smile. 'Predeleanu has told me that I should look after my own affairs, and that the government cannot permit disorder to spread all over the country. Others, however, say that the government is impotent, and can no longer control the fury of the angry crowds.'

Titu Herdelea was unable to provide him with any unpublished news, or at least, news which had any pretensions to authenticity. Nor did he want to tell Iuga the stories he had heard in town. He introduced him to Roşu, who was delighted, and, after he had praised Titu, said, almost solemnly: 'The truth, my dear gentlemen, is blacker than anybody suspects. The movement is spreading day by day, hour by hour, and nobody knows whether any measure can still be taken which can hold it back. That's what we have come to! Fortunately, no blood has yet been shed, and no human lives lost. But nobody knows what tomorrow may bring.'

He told Iuga in detail what had happened in certain villages and towns, what had been plundered and destroyed, and afterwards declared like an orator addressing the Chamber from the rostrum: 'The country's on the move, my dear sir, the whole country!'

Impressed by the secretary's prophetic tone, Grigore Iuga decided to leave for Amara the next day. He invited Titu to accompany him, promising that they would not stay for more than two or three days, and even if he himself had to stay longer, he would send Titu back to Bucharest. Titu was delighted at the idea, especially in the present circumstances, and looked enquiringly at Roşu, who answered paternally: 'Of course you can go, my dear fellow; how could I refuse you! Maybe you will bring me an interesting report for the paper. It would be a sensation; that is - oh, I'm sorry, it would be about Argeş . . . For the time being, at least, everything seems to be quiet there. But still, it's best to be prudent anywhere in the countryside, especially in these troubled days. So be careful, my dear fellow; see that the peasants don't lay hands on you!'

'I'm not a boyar!' Titu laughed.

'Don't laugh, my friend', exclaimed the secretary. 'Do you think that those poor Jews who are suffering now are boyars?'

5

'I'm only doing my duty in warning you, my dear, that it isn't wise to leave for the country now!' Gogu Ionescu said with unusual seriousness. 'Of course if you don't listen to me I can't prevent you, and naturally the manor at Lespezi is at your disposal any time. But I think that after reflection you will . . .'

'I have reflected!' Nadina interrupted contemptuously, 'I don't see any reason why I shouldn't go. On the contrary! Everything urges me not to postpone a settlement, and that can't be done without my presence, unless I risk being cheated, which I will not permit, precisely because I am a woman and everybody hopes to outwit me. As a matter of fact, I'm not going alone. I'm taking my lawyer with me.'

'Can't you just wait a little while until the situation clears up!'

'I'm not going tomorrow, Gogu!' Nadina replied humorously. 'I haven't fixed the day yet. I want the ground to dry a little, and the roads to improve first. And anyway, why are you so nervous, when everything is perfectly quiet in those parts?'

'Leave the estate alone now!' pleaded Gogu. 'You've leased it, now let the lease-holder settle with the peasants.'

'Do you really think the peasants fight women? Don't be silly!'

'Very well, I won't insist, because I see that it makes you all the more stubborn!' Gogu said. 'I've spoken to father, and he thinks the idea is absolute madness, to say nothing of Jenny, and you know how much she loves you. Don't you, my dear?'

Eugenia's eyes filled with tears. She wanted to answer, but as soon as she opened her mouth she started to weep. Gogu became anxious: 'My love, my soul; what is it, really?'

'You are the guilty one, Gogu,' Nadina protested. 'Why do you alarm people without any cause! Please excuse me, Jenny dear! If I had known that it would cause such a fuss I wouldn't have mentioned that I was going . . .'

Gogu and Eugenia had been her guests for lunch. While her divorce proceedings were going on, the three of them almost always ate together, either they with her, or she with them.

'Please allow me to tell you, Nadina, that it is absolute madness!' shouted Gogu Ionescu finally, exasperated by her stubbornness.

'It is precisely because it is madness that it is so tempting!' retorted Nadina, her eyes gleaming.

It was true that the more people advised her to relinquish the idea the more determined Nadina became. Olimp Stavrat, the lawyer who was putting through her divorce, a flirtatious elderly gentleman, with a carefully tended beard, had been the first. He occasionally made advances to Nadina, sometimes indiscreetly. Standing in front of her, he would sigh and raise his eyes heavenwards, as a sign of overwhelming passion. When he heard however, that he was expected to go with her to the countryside, he felt it incumbent upon himself to draw her attention to the dangers of such a trip. An ironical look from Nadina, however, was sufficient to change his opinion: 'Of course, I'm not thinking of myself, but of you, my dear lady! As for myself I am ready at any time to go with you to the end of the world.' He sighed and continued: 'Perhaps at last you will notice that in a lawyer's bosom, too, there beats a heart.'

Raul Brumaru gave a downright refusal.

'What on earth are you thinking of, Nadina? Going to the countryside now? Is this some joke of yours? Oh no, I'm quite happy in Bucharest!'

Even Rudolf, the chauffeur, felt it proper to object that the journey was rather risky.

As she saw everything as an adventure, the idea of a trip into the country now delighted Nadina. Of course, she had no serious reason to make haste; she could have waited. It was true that the divorce decree had now been made final, but there was still a fortnight or so to wait until the documents were issued. She had not the least intention of selling her estate until she could do so in her own name, but she kept telling herself that she had to decide to whom she would sell it, and settle everything, so that on the day that the divorce documents were issued she would be able to sign the bill of sale and end any contact with the countryside.

'Gogu, why do you want my last trip to the country to be a commonplace one?' she enquired. 'I hate everything common-place!'

6

On Saturday morning, when he was outlining the reign of the Phanariots¹⁰ to the fourth form, Dragoş the teacher suddenly found a policeman beside him in the classroom, quietly murmuring that the sergeant urgently wanted him at the police station to tell him something. As if he had been awaiting the call, the teacher answered quietly: 'Very well, I'll be there in a moment.'

As the policeman did not move, he added: 'Or do you want us to go together? Very good!'

He looked round, unable to remember where he had put his hat. It was on the table, and finally he saw it, but first he took up his overcoat. He then asked the policeman: 'Shall I let the children go, or . . .?'

As the man shrugged his shoulders, not knowing what to say, the teacher continued: 'But of course, why should . . . Stefan Bumbu, take my place at the desk. Keep order, and write on the blackboard the names of all those who make a noise. You understand? Be quiet, and behave yourselves, children. I'll soon be back!'

He looked at the policeman as if seeking something in his expression, but the man's face told him nothing. As they emerged into the street, he said, more firmly: 'We must call in at my house on the way, so that my wife should not imagine goodness knows what!'

Mrs Dragoş was terrified to see the policeman following her husband. She started to sob and then to mutter curses. Her mother-in-law followed suit.

'Stop wailing, I'm not dead yet!' Dragoş exclaimed, irritated by their tears. 'I don't even know what they've called me for!'

'Father-in-law, do get ready and go with him. Don't just sit there like a dumbcluck!' Florica shouted.

The old man moved more rapidly, as if her voice had roused him from a trance. The teacher wanted to say something, for after all, that was why he had called with the policeman, but realizing that he must not be late, he merely muttered in a dazed way: 'If I don't come back, then . . . But if that happens, I'll tell father, because he's coming with me anyway. Come on, let's go!'

He felt that he should at least kiss his wife, but restrained himself, to avoid making things worse and frightening her even more. As he left, he said, very quietly: 'Well - see you!'

In front of the police station, Lupu Chiriţoiu's cart was waiting with two horses. The teacher enquired with a start: 'Where to, father Lupu?'

'I don't know, Mr Nică', the old man answered. 'They ordered me to come with my cart and fodder for the horses, and I had to come!'

Sergeant Boiangiu was waiting for Dragoş in the courtyard and received him with a relieved expression, as if he had been afraid that the teacher would not come. They shook hands as usual and entered the office.

'What happened to make you fetch me from the classroom, sergeant?' Dragoş enquired, with the perplexed expression of a man who knows nothing, although within himself he knew that it must be the result of having angered Miron Iuga three days ago.

Boiangiu made a vague gesture, intended to convey that he was

in no way responsible. He told Dragoş that he had received a telegram to send the teacher to Piteşti immediately and have him taken to the prefect in person.

'And for what reason, sergeant?' the teacher asked, almost gravely.

'I have an order, Mr Dragoş, and I have to carry it out!' Boiangiu replied. 'I am very sorry, but . . .'

'Oh, I don't blame you by any means!' Dragoş protested. 'I just thought you might know the reasons, although after all it amounts to the same thing. So when do you say we must leave?'

'As soon as possible; that's what the order says!' answered the sergeant. 'But if you want to get anything from home we can postpone it for an hour, not more, because it's a long way to Piteşti, and father Lupu's horses . . .'

'Very well,' the teacher interrupted, wanting to preserve his dignity, especially as he felt himself beginning to tremble. 'Did you hear the order, father? Go quickly to the school, first of all, and tell the children to go home – I left them there by themselves. Then tell Florica to bring me whatever she thinks I should have for the road, but hurry, so that we don't waste time and get the sergeant into trouble!'

Boiangiu offered the teacher a chair, and they discussed everyday matters. For a short while, Mrs Boiangiu also appeared, to ask Dragoş how Florica was getting on. Then, after about half-an-hour, the teacher's brother, who had not been at home, but who had heard the news from the villagers, burst in. He was frightened and furious, and shouted that he would go to boyar Miron and fall on his knees. Boiangiu became angry, and said that if the lad was going to make trouble for him, he would have to change his attitude. Florica arrived with food and a change of clothes.

'So, Mr Dragoş, are we ready?' the sergeant enquired. 'Can we go?'

He opened the door of the constables' room, and commanded: 'Bogza! Come on!'

An armed policeman appeared in the doorway and clicked his heels to attention.

In the yards and the road, some thirty peasants had gathered. The news that the teacher had been arrested had spread through the village like wildfire. Boiangiu frowned, he was afraid of complications. Nevertheless, the tone he used in speaking to the villagers, was a mild one: 'Haven't you got anything else to do? Make room there! You just come to gape here as if it were a spectacle!'

Marin Stan approached him in a confidential manner, feeling he could afford to do so as he was friendly with the sergeant: 'Sergeant, be a good fellow . . . It's a shame that Mr Nică should go like this! If you wanted, you could . . .'

'Mind your own business, Marin, if you don't want to make me cross!' Boiangiu muttered.

As others, too, pressed him, the sergeant glanced at Dragoș, who was saying goodbye to Florica, and said: 'Come along, Mr Dragoș, come along! And I beg you, be careful to see that nothing happens on the way, because the policeman has orders to shoot!'

'Don't worry!' Dragoș smiled, and turning to the peasants who surrounded the cart he said: 'Goodbye, my friends, till we meet again!'

'God be with you!' They all answered him.

The cart started off. Dragoș did not look back. The rifle of the policeman next to him waved to and fro like a warning. Florică, her cheeks wet, walked down the middle of the road after the cart, which gradually grew smaller in the distance. Boiangiu sighed with relief; he had got rid of a great worry. Now he addressed those around him more easily: 'Do you think I can behave as I like here? Once the orders come from higher up, I have to carry them out, because I'm a soldier, and soldiers don't so much as blink when they're given an order!'

'Well, that's true!' some of the peasants agreed. But the crowd remained in the road, talking, discussing and raising questions. Suddenly Nicolae Dragoș burst out bitterly: 'You just stand there, chattering like old women, instead of going to boyar Miron and asking him not to let this injustice be done to poor Nică. And you won't realize that it was because of you that he got himself on to bad terms with the boyar, and . . .'

The peasants heard him out, some agreeing, but most of them saying nothing. Somebody said: 'We could go, because after all he can't kill us.' But another voice muttered lightly: 'Why don't you go, Nicu, instead of urging others?'

'Did I say I wouldn't?' the young man asked angrily. 'Do you think I'm afraid of the boyar like you?'

Other peasants, more excited, and women and children, too, began to join them and the crowd filled the street from the police station right down to Mother Ioana's place. Talking and arguing, the crowd moved towards the front of the Iuga manor, and just as Luca Talabă was remarking to a group that in other parts people didn't let themselves be trodden underfoot like this, Trifon Guju burst out in his piercing voice: 'Come on, all of you, don't let's chatter like a lot of old crows!'

They entered the yard of the servant's quarters. A flock of pigeons rose into the air and poultry scattered, frightened. The yard was full. Leonte Bumbu, the steward, came out bareheaded and asked in amazement: 'What's up? Why's the whole village here?'

Several voices answered at the same time. The steward scratched the back of his head and went on: 'The boyar will be cross about . . .'

'Let him be cross, we're cross, too!' said a miserable voice from among the crowd.

By chance, Miron Iuga himself appeared at the moment. The oncoming of spring had made him look younger.

'What's happened, Bumbu? What do all those people want?'

Marin Stan began to tell him why they had come, and others continued, until Miron Iuga realized what it was all about. 'So they've arrested him? Well, they've done right. And now I hope you'll regain your common sense!'

Some shouted impudently that the teacher should be pardoned. Miron lost his temper: 'This sort of thing has no effect on me! I'm surprised you don't know me yet; after all we live together: I thought you were decent people, but I'm afraid I was mistaken. There's a whole crowd of you now, but when it's a matter of the contracts you make yourselves pretty scarce!'

'We can't go on with the old contracts, master!' Toader Strîmbu cried. 'My children are starving, although I work all day long . . .'

'You can't go on?' exclaimed Miron Iuga, 'Well then! Stay at home, laze about, and whine. Those who're hard-working and sober can live out of honest work.'

'Nobody's twiddling their thumbs, master, we all work hard enough, and it's about time you helped us!' Serafim Mogoş said, mildly but firmly.

'I shan't bargain with anybody, and I don't ask you to!' old Miron said roughly. 'As long as there's land, we can find plenty of hands to work it! If you don't want to work, we'll get people from Transylvania!'

'We don't want foreigners here, master; it's we who've worked this land always, not them!' cried Trifon Guju.

'D'you think I shall ask your opinion you wretch?' Miron Iuga asked furiously. 'Just you start getting impudent! Be off, I've nothing else to say to you! Clear out at once!'

'It isn't fair like this, master!' said Luca Talabă firmly. 'Not at all, it isn't!'

Miron Iuga stood motionless until the courtyard was cleared. Then he said in disgust: 'Close the gates, Bumbu!'

7

Next day, Sunday, as the people came out from church, the news spread that two men on grey horses had just passed through the village with the king's orders. On the space in front of the inn,

where the villagers usually danced the *hora*, groups of people gathered to hear the news. Many embellished their version with details. Ignat Cercel was wandering from group to group, like a stray mongrel, asking the same question: 'D'you think he gave orders about the land?'

Ion Pravilă, the mayor, having listened to right and to left, cried sarcastically. 'You're sure your horsemen weren't purple cows?'

Nobody laughed. An old man said reproachfully: 'You shouldn't jeer, Mr Mayor. It's no laughing matter. Things won't always be crooked, justice will come one day, too!'

'But justice doesn't come on horseback, old fellow!' Pravilă replied in a different tone.

'It doesn't matter how it comes, it's enough that it comes!' the old man muttered.

Leonte Orbișor said he'd heard that Nistor Mucenicu's Anghelina had met the horsemen. Someone – he didn't remember who – had told him. Lăpu Chiritoiu thought that there must be some truth in the story, because he too had heard a lot of things in Pitești, the day before yesterday, when he had taken Mr Nică there.

After a while Vasile Zidaru brought Anghelina to tell them how and what had happened. Seeing so many people around her, their eager eyes fixed on her, the woman shrank back, afraid to speak: 'Oh dear, I've left the children on their own at home, and . . .'

The mayor wanted to cross-examine her. Anghelina was frightened and defended herself by saying that other people must have seen the horsemen too; after all, they hadn't kept out of people's way, why should they?

'Come on, my girl, let's have it all from beginning to end; nobody's going to eat you!' Ignat Cercel urged her mildly. 'We want to know what orders they carried, too, so that we don't make any mistake!'

Finally Anghelina took her courage in both hands: 'I was just going to my mother-in-law's to borrow some more maize. I had the boy with me. As I passed by the church, I heard the angelus, and crossed myself and felt ashamed, because with all my troubles and worries I don't get to Mass. I'd hardly crossed myself, when I saw two men on grey horses coming down the road. I was fair amazed. They come from up Lespezi way. I moved back to the side of the road, and one of them called to me and said: "Where are you going, woman?" I said: "Just over there, to my mother-in-law." And then the other one said: "I can see you're very poor: but don't worry, we've got good news. We've been sent by the king to tell the people that from now on all the estates are theirs, and they should start right away to divide them fairly, and drive out the boyars and lease-holders and burn their manors and farmyards

and their farming tools, so that they'll never come back! Do you understand, woman? The people must not delay, for this is the king's word, and those who don't obey will pay for it bitterly!" That's what the horseman said to me, and then I said: "I understand, but . . ." "That's all right then! Goodbye!" So I said: "May God bless you!" and they went on towards the valley, and I turned round and watched them go for a while, and then I went on my way and told my father-in-law what the horsemen had told me and he was fair amazed too.'

The men remained silent; finally Ignat Cercel said, nodding his head: 'A wonderful affair, this is!'

Then they heard more from Anghelina; that the horsemen had been dressed in white, and that they had gone on either to Ruginoasa or Vaideci. After that the mayor sent her home to look after her children.

Much later, Anton Nacu arrived; he had just been to Ruginoasa on some errand. He, too, said that he had met the horsemen in white on his way, and had been told the same thing: that the people should divide the boyars' land without delay, and that those who resisted, should not be spared, as the peasants themselves had not been spared.

Although spring had now come, the weather was dull, and the sky leaden. The people shivered, but they did not disperse. Towards noon Matei Dulmanu arrived from Lespezi with others, reporting that the horsemen had passed through their village, too. Irimie Popa, watchman to Cosma Buruiană, came back from Vaideci, saying that there, too, people were wondering about the horsemen, who had ordered the villagers to dig their ploughshares into the boyars' land at once.

'It can only mean one thing, Irimie,' Leonte Orbișor commented: 'Our turn has come now!'

'Remember how I kept telling you, long ago, that the king wanted to divide the land?' boasted Ignat Cercel. 'You didn't want to believe me then, and now you see I was right!'

The mayor was silenced; he retired into the inn to warm himself with a drop of something, and after a few moments disappeared home, not wishing to be there when people indulged in such nonsense.

Petre Petre eagerly reminded Luca Talabă how much they had run about in Bucharest for the lady's estate, and concluded: 'It was a good thing we didn't get involved in that business!'

'Oh, you wait and see, things aren't finished yet! But if the estates are going to be divided, as people say, it would be a very good thing!'

The voice of Trifon Guju, morose and angry, rose above the

hesitations of the other peasants: 'Well then, what are we going to do? Do we just sit stripping the corn-cobs, or do we . . . ?'

'That's it, what are we going to do?' new voices echoed. 'We've had enough of talk and advice!'

'True enough!' Melinte Heruvim cut in sharply, 'now let the boyars feed on empty words, because we've had enough of them!'

THE FIRES

Chapter Seven

THE SPARK

I

On the same Sunday, at about noon, Grigore and Titu Herdelea alighted at Burdea station, where the yellow chaise from Amara, with Ichim up in front, was waiting for them.

'Everything all right here, Ichim?' Grigore enquired.

'It's quiet for the time being, sir!' the coachman answered. Grigore did not like the qualification, but he did not press the matter, the irritations of the journey had been enough. He and young Herdelea had been the only occupants of the carriage. Nearly all the others had been empty, too, but there had been frightened crowds at every station, repeating tales of horrors already perpetrated by the peasants, and even more concerned about what they might do in the future. Everybody, however, had admitted in the end that in their own region things were quiet, but had added that unimaginable things were coming. Grigore knew that nothing had yet happened in these parts, and was annoyed with all these exaggerations, seeing them as provocations to disorder. Moreover, at the station called Titu, Grigore had the misfortune to encounter Ilie Rogojinaru, the lease-holder with whom he had travelled last autumn and who had plagued him with his stolid agricultural theories. He could not get rid of the man before Costești: 'Well, sir, was I right about the peasants?' he asked, loud and jovial as always.

Afterwards he came into their compartment to cheer them up a little, saying that he had rushed to Bucharest because he had heard that Madame Iuga's Babaroaga estate was for sale. A long time ago he had tried to get a place nearer Bucharest and would very much like a piece of land in Lower Argeș, where he had begun his thorny career in agriculture. First of all he had cast around for more information, and had then called in at Strada Argintari. He had not known that the boyars were in the middle of a divorce, and had asked the lady – now beautiful she was, he hadn't even dared to look at her for fear of drawing the evil eye on her – how Master

Grigoriță was, and could have kicked himself when she told him about the divorce with her own little mouth. They had discussed business, and decided to meet at her country place within the next few days, for she was going there precisely to sell the estate. And just now the uprising had started, and he must make haste home to Olena, where he had gathered the fruit of all his years of toil, because he knew how to speak and deal with the peasants.

'Maybe the Lord will preserve us from conflagration!' he exclaimed. 'If only the powers-that-be were clever and energetic. The peasants want justice, but they need a master as well. If the master is weak, justice will never be enough for the peasants. That is why I say that without a firm hand the people won't calm down. I don't believe the newspapers, they tell more lies than truth. But the day before yesterday I met a Jewish lease-holder who comes from around Vaslui, and what that poor man told me was beyond belief. He had settled things with his peasants, as he had done before. But when the contracts were to be signed, the prefect turned up and told the peasants not to let themselves be cheated by a Jewish lease-holder, it would be better to drive him out. Now, have you ever heard such a thing? A prefect, urging the peasants to drive a lease-holder out! That was all they were waiting for! They set fire to his manor, killed his stock, and committed a lot of other atrocities. And why do you think the prefect incited the peasants? Because he hated the Jews? Oh no! His brother-in-law wanted to get hold of the Jew's lease! But he didn't get it. He thought that once he had driven the Jew away he would be able to lay hands on the fine estate. But things turned out differently, because the peasants rose and wanted to divide it among themselves. Of course, the prefect was furious and called in the army. But it was no use, the people weren't afraid, because they knew very well that the men weren't allowed to shoot; instead they rushed at the soldiers with pitchforks and stones so that those poor devils didn't know which way to run. So, you see, gentlemen, how will the peasants be prevailed upon to calm down and do as they're told, if the authorities themselves encourage them to behave badly? It's enough that the opposition is irresponsible, and makes a noise in all the newspapers, saying the peasants are right, poor lost sheep!'

Grigore steadily grew more depressed as they approached Amara. He felt that the atmosphere was becoming increasingly ill-omened. Seeing his companion's gloom, young Herdelea regretted that he had come, and wondered why he had been asked. Sensing this, Grigore suddenly said wearily: 'I'm sorry I'm like this, I myself don't know what's the matter with me!'

The chaise made its way with difficulty along the road, rutted

with the early spring rains. Ichim, urging on the horses, muttered: 'The road never gets any drier when it rains all the time and there's hardly any sun.'

Grigore attentively examined the villages and the fields, as if trying to discover something. Under the dull vault of the sky, the dark shivering earth was dotted with gleaming eyes of brackish water, and in the villages, as was usual on a Sunday, the peasants had gathered talking in the inn, or in front of one of the houses. To Grigore, however, it seemed there was a new light in their eyes, and that their faces were set in more determined lines. After they had passed through Lespezi, he asked the coachman: 'How's the work going, Ichim?'

'Fine, master, because we haven't even started yet!' the old man answered carefully. 'And the weather's been bad, it's been raining all the time, and the people haven't made up their minds about the contracts.'

'So the contracts haven't even been concluded yet?' Grigore exclaimed.

'No, they haven't, sir, the people keep holding back and putting things off, because in these parts the news has been spread that the estates must be divided among the people, and the people are waiting...'

In Amara, more peasants than usual were gathered round Busuioc's inn. Ichim said that people had come from other villages, too, because of two horsemen who had passed that morning with the king's orders.

Even on his father's face Grigore could perceive some anxiety, although the old man endeavoured to hide it. Young Iuga knew that he would not be able to get any information there, and that he would have to contact the peasants to find out what the atmosphere was really like, although Ichim's few words had indicated enough. He first spoke to Bumbu, the steward, who confessed that he was absolutely terrified; it was impossible to tell boyar Miron anything, he was too nervous and afraid of making the boyar cross. If only the old man had agreed three weeks ago to ease the conditions of the contract slightly, he would have had nothing to worry about today. The people would have been satisfied with a few crumbs then, but now they did not even want to hear anything about the contracts – especially as all sorts of rumours were running around about dividing the estates – so that now there was no way of coming to an agreement with anybody.

Grigore went into the village with Titu. They met Sergeant Boiangiu, who told them that up to now everything had been quiet, only the arrest of Dragoș, the teacher, had disturbed the villagers. He didn't know why the arrest had been made, but in the village

people said that it had been due to boyar Miron, because Dragoş had interceded on the peasants' behalf.

They finally joined the group in front of the inn. Grigore asked them about their troubles, and received mild but noncommittal answers. They either did not dare or they did not want to open their hearts to him although their glances were more enquiring than hostile. In particular Grigore pressed Petre, whose harsh features seemed more anxious and tense. Petre became confused. He was devoted to Grigore, especially since the latter had given him money for the oxen and cancelled his debts, and was ready to jump into the fire for him. Dazedly he muttered: 'Well, Master Grigoriţă, we did as the others are doing. The old contracts were too hard, and we couldn't live. Father Lupu, you tell Master Grigoriţă about it; you're older and better at talking!'

'Come on, father Lupu, let's hear you,' Grigore encouraged him, with friendly curiosity.

'Well, sir, some of us have agreed, others are turning things over, each according to his own brains and feelings!' Lupu Chirişoiu said, weighing each word. 'But the people have a very hard time, master, you must believe us! I'm old, and only the Lord knows whether I shall last out to Christmas, but I know that we are going from bad to worse. I was a lad in your grandfather's days, Master Grigoriţă, and I know how things were then. He was just like you, just as good and kind, and would never hear of anybody starving or living in wretchedness, but would instantly order that they should have everything they need from the manor. He only took a tenth of the harvest and that's how we managed to live, and there was enough land, because there were less people.'

He continued his reminiscences until others interrupted him, asking Grigore about the horsemen who had carried the king's message and enquiring when and how the division of the land would start.

On their way back, Grigore asked young Herdelea for his impressions.

'It seems that the people are quiet enough,' Titu said. 'If one knew how to handle them one could get on with them. But what one never knows is, till when, because . . .'

'It is precisely this which is the main question!' Grigore murmured in a worried tone.

He spent the evening alone with his father so as to discuss the situation and decide how to avoid a possible catastrophe. The moment he heard that his son had spoken with the people in the village, Miron Iuga frowned, and when Grigore asked him to intervene to obtain the release of the teacher as soon as possible, the old man burst out: 'So you want me to humiliate myself in front of the peasants?'

'It's not a question of humiliation, father!' exclaimed Grigore, 'Dragoş has not committed any crime which . . .'

'It's your Dragoş who stirs up trouble among the people of my village!' Miron answered gravely. 'It was he who confused them and set them against me, reviving all their grievances. What your people have been doing in the towns, Dragoş had done here. He has destroyed my thirty years of work! As a matter of fact, for your information, in case you don't know, it was I who – for good reasons – requested the prefect to remove him from the village, and I assure you that the absence of your teacher is in the peasants' best interests!'

'There you are quite mistaken, father; it is precisely at this moment that Dragoş is indispensable here. With his personal influence, he is the only one who can put a brake on the outbursts of hatred!'

'Oh, if we had reached that stage, Grigoriţă, it would be very bad for us!' Old Miron said contemptuously. 'I myself am the brake, my son!'

Grigore was filled with horror. He saw that his father was living in another world, and would not look at things as they were. Telling old Iuga everything he had heard, he emphasized that he had had time to find out only a minute amount of the grievances which threatened to burst into flames. Finally, he asked his father to let him try to come to terms with the peasants.

Miron refused. He was convinced that Grigore with his womanish methods, would only make matters worse. His confidence in his own experience and his knowledge of people was such that he would have considered it injurious to his pride if at this moment of crisis he did not use his own tried and trusted methods, worked out over three decades, but instead, passed the matter over to a young man whose head was stuffed with theories.

'One second of weakness, hesitation or lack of energy would only be an encouragement to the wretched peasants; they would be excited by your agitation, and would pursue their evil deeds!' Miron said in a superior manner. 'In fact, you exaggerate the state of things here, though, of course, without realizing it. I don't know what is going on elsewhere, but I think tendentious exaggeration has created a depressing atmosphere in general. With my people, however, I have my own well-tried methods. First submission, and then negotiation. Naturally, one cannot work, or get any results, by using two methods at the same time. If you had asked me, I would have told you not to meddle with the peasants or listen to their demands. This, in my opinion, is a sign of weakness, and in so doing, you portray me as a stony-hearted tyrant and upset my own policy.'

'When there is a conflict', Grigore objected, 'it is always as well to have an intermediary, who . . .'

'No, no', the old man interrupted, all the more energetically, as he recalled how the teacher had made a similar suggestion. 'I know of no conflict, and furthermore I don't admit even the possibility of conflict between myself and the peasants. It would mean that I, too, exploit them like the others, or that I take advantage of their helplessness. You know very well that it is not our custom to grow fat by depriving the peasants.'

The discussion went on until late after midnight. Grigore tried every argument and appeal, but his persistence irritated the old man as much as Miron's obtuseness infuriated his son, who finally told him flatly that his contempt for reality might well endanger his property and his life.

'It's getting late, and we are wasting our time arguing!' said the old man in the end. 'I'm sorry that you still haven't learnt that your father never gives in when he is sure he is right, and that he does not bend except in front of the Lord.'

'Then is there nothing else left for me but to go, as I came?' asked Grigore.

'I think not,' the old man murmured, shaking his head. 'I would have liked to have had you near me, but I am afraid that instead of finding you a support I would find you a hindrance. You go back quietly to Bucharest, and leave me to defend my land. As long as I live, this is my duty.'

The next morning, Grigore attempted to resume the discussion, but his father firmly stopped him, and advised him to leave. The young man had turned things over in his mind, and it seemed that this was, indeed, the only solution. Otherwise he would merely meet arguments at every turn, which could only paralyse all his movements. Moreover, Nadina had announced her arrival. Grigore now heard about this for the first time, and said angrily: 'What sort of impression will this make - you doing business with my former wife? A very nice one, indeed! What will the villagers think?'

'Just because she is divorced from you, does that mean she has become a leper with whom nobody can have civil relations or do any business?' the old man enquired. 'Here, as in everything else, you exaggerate.'

'I don't know which of us exaggerates, father, but I do know that I cannot stay and meet Nadina on the very eve of the issue of our decree!' Grigore exclaimed.

'That's just one more reason why you should leave me alone, for both our sakes!' Miron agreed gravely.

Grigore had to leave immediately after lunch to be in time to

catch the fast train at Costești. Ichim, in the yellow chaise, arrived early at the foot of the steps. Unemotional as always, Miron embraced his son and Grigore, hardly able to control his feelings, kissed him on both cheeks.

'I shall return in a few days, father, when I hope I shall find you alone!'

'You come back when everything is quiet, Grigoriță!' the old man answered confidently.

He accompanied the chaise to the front of the new villa, alongside the heart-shaped flower-bed, ravaged by winter's severity. As he passed through the entrance, Grigore looked back. The old man was standing in the same spot, like a post rooted in the soil.

The peasants were gathered in front of the inn, as they had been the previous day, appearing not to have moved at all.

'Why are these people still waiting, Ichim?' Grigore enquired.

'As if they knew, sir!' the coachman muttered. 'They just wait like fools.'

Titu Herdelca felt superfluous, as he had throughout his visit. He was glad that they were leaving, he had a sensation of emerging from a seething cauldron.

2

'I wonder why he's going back so quickly,' remarked Ignat Cercel his eyes following the yellow chaise as it departed.

From force of habit, all the peasants looked after it.

'What should keep him here?' somebody enquired. 'It's better and warmer where he's going.'

'Don't worry, the old boyar's left behind!' Serafim Mogoș said morosely. 'You don't get rid of boyars like that, Gherasim!'

'If only they were all like the young master!' exclaimed Petre. 'You saw yesterday how he came and talked to the people. If it wasn't for the old man . . .'

'But you see, the trouble is that the old man holds the reins!' Serafim Mogoș said.

There was a slight breeze, and the people huddled into their coats and pulled their *căciulās* down over their ears, but somehow felt unable to leave. Some of them hastily went home to look to the animals or snatch a bite, but soon came back, as if afraid that something would happen in their absence. People who had come the day before from neighbouring villages to ask about the horsemen in white, came again, bringing others with them, as if to a great social occasion. They discussed the same troubles as they always had, but more cautiously, as if they might be overheard.

Each avoided the eyes of the other, as if afraid of what he would see burning there or to prevent others from discovering the fire in his own eyes. But a doubt was written on every face, the same miserable, passionate question, waiting to be answered.

Every time the mayor passed, he shouted: 'Hey, men, haven't you got any homes, or wives, or children?'

Vasile Zidaru always gave the same dry retort, which called forth harsh laughter: 'We're boyars now, Mr Mayor, that's how times have changed!'

Only as evening came on did they at last disperse, after seeing Colonel Ștefănescu in his closed chaise and later Cosma Buruiană, the lease-holder, making their way towards the manor. However, nobody saw the Greek; he arrived after dark, and by then only a few laggards remained in the inn.

Miron Iuga had called them together, even Platamonu, in order to collect the facts. The most timorous of them all was the retired Colonel, who complained like an old woman that he was about to lose the fruit of a life's work. His greatest anxiety, however, was concerning his three daughters, whom he should have sent away for fear these mad beasts should defile them. However, after Miron Iuga had addressed a few firm remarks to him, it emerged that all was peaceful and quiet at his place, the contracts had been concluded, but work had not started yet. It was the morrow he feared, for you never could trust these demented beasts.

'How can I keep calm, sir, knowing them as I do?' cried Ștefănescu shrilly. 'You've got the police right here, on your doorstep. I haven't got anything, I'm alone with my poor daughters at the mercy of the villains. I asked General Dardălat if he would send at least a small detachment of soldiers to guard my little girls. But alas, he was unable to - on his own estate he has only one orderly. And they ask us to go on farming in this country! Naturally the peasants skin us alive, when not even the government cares what happens to us!'

'If you talk like that in front of the peasants, no wonder they do!' Miron retorted contemptuously.

'How could I? How can you imagine such a thing!' exclaimed the colonel indignantly. 'I am speaking to you here, as a fellow-sufferer! With the peasants I am extremely military in my manner! Really!'

Platamonu was calmer. He had sent his daughter to Pitești some while before, and he, his wife and his son had nothing to fear. They would stay whatever happened; indeed, they had nowhere else to go, as all their money was sunk in the two estates. (Of course, he omitted to mention the good currency he had in the bank in Bucharest. That was his own business). In fact, he was on excellent terms with the peasants, he had never been brutal with them, or

beaten them, so there was no reason why any of them should hate him. Poor Chirilă Păun had got cross about the affair between the girl and Aristide, but he would straighten this out in the end. He had concluded the contracts smoothly as concerned Lespezi, admittedly granting a few concessions, but he hoped to make up for these in other ways. The only trouble was Babaroaga. The peasants who had formerly wanted to buy it, now asked for it to be parcelled out among them free of charge. Fortunately Madame Nadina was coming, and then the whole affair would be settled.

Cosma Buruiană had nothing new to tell. Iuga knew his fears only too well, but what Cosma did not want to divulge to anyone was that he had warned his family to be ready to leave at any moment; better to lose everything than lose one's life.

Miron Iuga advised them to keep cool and be firm, although he realized his words might as well have been cast to the winds. These people were already frightened to death. He had actually called them together to check his own impressions; after what he had previously heard he had concluded that the rumoured intention of the peasants to plunder was largely the exaggeration of the faint-hearted, and now he felt that this had been fully confirmed by the wailings of the lease-holders. Everything was clear now.

He had more confidence in the village mayor and the sergeant, with whom he had a long talk that evening, after the lease-holders had left. They reported that the people were quiet, just grumbling as usual about the contracts. If only the weather would improve, each would go back to his work. People had given up the idea of buying Babaroaga, because they had got hold of the notion that the authorities would divide the estate between them without payment. Hence the story of the horsemen in white, announcing the division of the land. This had always been their dream, especially in the spring. Nevertheless, Praviță added in a respectful tone, that he must work hand-in-hand with the police, so that if any of these half-wits committed some evil, they could immediately be put in their proper place. Boiangiu, for his part, said that the mayor, too, must be all eyes, for the forces at the police station were rather small; only five men, including himself. Miron Iuga promised that the attention of the prefect, who must pass this way some time soon, should be drawn to this; he would ask Boerescu to send reinforcements. He added, however, that order did not depend on the number of people on guard, but on their vigilance.

'The people must feel the presence of authority!' said old Iuga. 'There must be no provocation, but neither must there be any hesitation. Any attempt to cause disorder must be energetically crushed, to serve as an example, before it encourages others'

'Very well, sir!' the mayor murmured humbly.

'Sir!' responded Boiangiu, his chest swelling, to indicate that he had more than enough zeal.

3

Titu Herdelea and Grigore Iuga arrived in Bucharest towards the evening. The fast train had been crammed with terror-stricken passengers who had left their homes for fear of the peasants, fleeing to Bucharest as the only refuge from all that menaced them.

'This is the beginning of the panic!' Grigore observed sadly. 'And it only serves to feed all these disasters!'

As they could not obtain a cab in the crush outside the Gara de Nord, they clung to an overcrowded horse-car, then got off at the Piața Teatrul Național, where Grigore said that he was going to the Predeleanu's. Titu wanted to walk around the town later on to gather more news. As they shook hands in parting, a small gipsy news vendor approached them, shouting at the top of his voice: '*Adevărul*, special edition! *Adevărul*! Special!'

Both bought a copy. Heavy headlines leapt from the page: *Peasant Disturbances Discussed in the Chamber*. Without a word they moved under a street lamp to read. A question in the Chamber had aroused a heated debate around the peasant disturbances, which were spreading with lightning speed. Several opposition deputies had accused the government of impotence in the face of this outburst of grievances. They defended the peasants, and vehemently opposed any resort to bloody repressions. On the other hand, several government supporters accused the opposition of backing the miscreants, alleging that through its agents it was encouraging illegal acts by the peasants.

'Very good propaganda!' Grigore muttered. 'The country is burning and the gentlemen pay compliments to each other!'

Titu Herdelea went on his way down the Calea Victoriei. All he heard was talk about 'revolt', 'peasants', 'disturbances' and 'lease-holders'. He turned right along the boulevard towards his room, but was halted by a familiar voice: 'Hey there, Mr Herdelea, how are you? What do you think about these disturbances? Eh? See how surprised the boyars are? They thought that they had found their scapegoat: the Yids were guilty of the boyars' exploitation of the peasants! You see, in these parts it is always the Yids who are responsible for all evils. But now that the peasants have turned against the boyars, they are not good peasants any more! Now the army is called in to kill them and hang them!'

It was young Mendelson the shoemaker's son, from the Buzzești quarter. His strange smile aroused Titu's anger, and he answered

accusingly: 'There's nothing to be pleased about, Mr Mendelson, in . . .'

'What do you mean by "pleased"?' the young man protested, pronouncing his words so vehemently that his Jewish accent sounded almost comical. 'Who told you I was pleased? In the first place, I'm a socialist, and against violence, so it's impossible for me to be pleased. And besides, I know the wretched peasants will pay dearly with their blood for their courage in rising against the boyars.'

For a quarter of an hour he held forth on the theory of social injustice, trying to convince Herdelea that the action of the peasants grieved him more than other people. In order to get rid of him, Titu made the excuse that he must hurry home, for he had been away, and had only just returned. But young Mendelson accompanied him as far as his front gate, and would not let him go until he had finished his lecture.

Two letters were waiting for Titu. One, which had arrived through the post, informed him that Tanța would be coming on Wednesday evening at six, after dusk, and ended with thousands of kisses. The other had been left by Belciug, the priest, announcing that he was departing in much haste, as the uprising had assumed such vast proportions and would soon reach Bucharest. Any delay might cost him his life. Titu was sorry that the priest had run away like this, he would have liked to have sent his family some things from Bucharest, even if only trifles. With the priest's note in his hand, he suddenly thought: When had Tanța said she was coming? On Wednesday? Today was Monday, so it would be the day after tomorrow.

The next day, he appeared at *Drapelul* earlier than usual, but Roșu's room was filled with reporters and bustle as never before. The events of the previous day in the Chamber were being discussed, and in particular a special article by an ex-minister which had appeared in the opposition's paper *Glasul Poporului* (*The Voice of the People*). Deliceanu, the editor, was breathing fire and brimstone in his comments on certain passages, which were being read in a loud voice by the ruddy-complexioned Bebe Antoniadă, who was always in a chronic state of indignation.

'Listen, chief, now comes the toughest bit!' he shouted triumphantly. 'Listen: "The incapacity and inefficiency of the government to deal with these grave events makes my heart bleed. What all the peasants ask is to be allowed to live, and this is being impudently refused; when the just demands of the starving cry to the skies – the honourable Prime Minister talks of established rights. What rights? The right to exterminate our peasants – those peasants who are the mainstay, the strength, the life-blood of our country?" But wait,

now we come to a really prize bit: "There exists but one single right, which ranks above all others, the right of the peasants to live in their own country, their right not to have everything filched from them, their right to be defended from the venality of a corrupt administration, their right to some support in their fight to win the land of their forefathers from the dirty hands of the merciless exploiters. Those who cannot comprehend this thrice-sacred struggle must be relegated to a position more suited to the level of their intelligence. All of us must realize that there is a limit to everything, even in this blest country of ours, and that the very stones would cry out if we allowed Rumanian blood to be shed because of the incapacity of the government!"'

For a moment all were silent in sheer consternation. Then Deliceanu, his fury reaching bursting point, exclaimed: 'This is open incitement to rebellion! There is only one suitable answer: the arrest of the author, no matter who he may be! All the more shame that he's an ex-minister!'

'That's how they are, chief,' Bebe Antoniadă said sententiously. 'As long as they want to overthrow the government, any method will serve.'

'And that is precisely why the government can answer such criminal actions only in one way - Văcărești Prison's the place for them!' the editor announced militantly. 'Or if the government feels itself unable to resort to this, it should withdraw and leave it to the demagogues themselves to quieten the disturbances they have provoked.'

'But why should they withdraw, sir!' protested an old journalist, Davidescu, frightened at the prospect of having to go back into the opposition. 'Better push them into Black Marias and knock a little sense into them!'

Titu Herdelea, who had withdrawn into a corner, intimidated by this journalistic forum, now became the centre of attention, for Roșu enquired what he had seen in the country. After Titu had reported that in general everything was quiet, only the atmosphere was rather depressed, Deliceanu went on: 'Naturally! Where their agitators have not yet penetrated, it is quiet. But just send them the article by this gentleman, the ex-minister, and see if the calm continues!'

Roșu was not alone until lunch-time, although he was very anxious to tell Titu, his daily confidant, some startling details known only to him. When Titu made ready to leave, the secretary said to him in a significant voice: 'It wouldn't be a bad idea if you dropped into the Chamber this afternoon, my dear boy! There might be something interesting again! And do come earlier to the office tomorrow, understand?'

On Tuesday morning the sun glinted through the curtain of leaden clouds. Beneath its warm rays, the peasants clustered around Busuioc's inn to try to find out what had been hatched at the old boyar's place last night. The mayor, in a treacly, jocular fashion repeatedly asked: 'Why d'you waste your time hanging around here, you fellows? Are you waiting for those fabulous horsemen to turn up again? Why don't you look after your own business?'

'Ah, those horsemen, and weren't they right with their message!' Marin Stan exclaimed, somewhat tipsily – he had spent a little time at Christea's bar. 'Otherwise, what would have brought our boyars together to hold council? Ah, fear is a strong mistress! Isn't she, Mr Mayor?'

'What sort of a figure "you think you cut, Marin, talking such rot?' Praviľă retorted ironically. 'Who should they be afraid of? You with your fat head?'

Some laughed, others shouted threateningly: 'Yes, let them be afraid of us, too!'

'I don't suppose they met just for the joy and fun of it!' Serafim Mogoș remarked.

'They must be plotting to hide the orders for dividing the land!' Ignat Cercel said.

'It's just as well the horsemen told us about it, so that we shouldn't let them get away with it!' Toader Strimbu added.

The mayor interrupted them heatedly: 'Shut your big traps, or I'll lose my temper. I speak to you decently and you go on and on talking a lot of rot! We shan't agree like this!'

Marin Stan, wearing a wistful, slightly ridiculous expression, suddenly enquired: 'Mr Mayor, maybe I've had a drop. I don't deny it, but tell me, what did you and the sergeant get up to at the old boyar's place last night, eh?'

'Why, d'you think we're hiding something from you, or anybody else?' Praviľă answered aggressively. 'Is it a disgrace to have boyar Miron send for me? I'm the mayor, after all; well then? Have I done anything to be ashamed of? Is it a bad thing to try to keep order and peace in the village? Is that what you're saying, Marinică?'

'That's the last thing I was thinking of!' Marin answered gravely, his tipsiness seeming to have disappeared. 'What we want is peace and quiet, and justice! But we think the boyar asked you how to go about dividing the land for the people.'

'D'you think boyar Miron, of all people, is going to divide his land, Marin my boy?' the mayor asked, laughing. 'Don't you know how he loves his estate?'

'Well, who would divide his estate willingly?' Ignat Cercel muttered. 'But if it's an order from the king! Haven't they taken my pig to pay the taxes? And I kept quiet, what else could I do? And my children are starving!'

Having no answer to this, Mayor Pravilă cracked a few jokes and then wandered off to his office. At noon, however, Matei Dulmanu appeared, having come from Lespezi, where he had heard from the servants at the manor that the lady was coming in the car from Bucharest today. All the rooms had already been cleaned and the fires laid. This set the cat among the pigeons; the peasants were in a ferment. From the crowd, voices rose and clashed.

'Why's she coming? Does she still want to sell Babaroaga to others?'

'We shan't let her, how could we?'

'Better set fire to the place!'

'Maybe she's had an order to divide, to . . .'

'We must dig our ploughshares into the land, and not wait!'

'Let her come, after all, what are we here for?' shouted Petre Petre, louder than the others.

As the agitation continued, Pavel Tunsu, a withered pin-headed little man, son-in-law to Mother Ioana, argued with his small son Costică: 'Go to your granny's, my boy, and play with the other children. That's what your mother said you should do. Get along, Costică, don't trail between people's legs after me. This is no place for children, don't you see?' and as Costică remained silent and continued to hang to his sleeve, his father continued: 'Come on, now or I'll tan your backside, d'you hear? Or don't you want to?'

'I'm afraid of the dogs,' the child whimpered.

'What dogs? There aren't dogs on the way to your granny's; it's only over there, after all!' his father urged. 'Go along, there's a good boy, don't plague me!'

Pavel Tunsu's argument and threat, for his father did occasionally strike him when he was cross, made Costică start off reluctantly down the road. He was barefoot, bareheaded and wore a dirty, torn shirt with wide sleeves. As soon as he was away from the crowd he regained his usual high spirits. On reaching Mother Ioana's cottage and before entering the yard, he shouted for Vasile Zidaru's son Nicu, who lived across the road, making such a noise that he disturbed all the neighbours.

Mother Ioana was fussing over a broody hen which no longer wanted to sit on her eggs, so that she had to chase it all over the garden and the yard. When she heard her nephew's voice, she muttered under her breath, for mad Anton had only just left her in peace: 'I've hardly got rid of one addle-pate, and now here's a worse one!'

Then Costică and Nicu appeared in the doorway and she grumbled without looking at them: 'Listen, boys, you must play decently, don't make a nuisance of yourselves. I've got enough to worry about as it is, devil take you!'

Costică paid no attention to his grand-mother's nagging, and, after jumping around and teasing the dogs, announced that he was hungry.

'And they send you, here, hungry, too, so that I have to feed you – as if I haven't fed you enough!' mother Ioana exclaimed. 'There's the *mămăligă* on the table, wrapped in a cloth, and the basin with the milk is on the hearth. Go on, stuff until you burst!'

She went on with her work, and the children played. From time to time, however, she cursed them so that they wouldn't get up to any mischief.

'Leave the dogs alone! You little devils, they'll bite you! Costică, devil take you, don't s... The hens, they get frightened, and don't come back in the evening! Are you mad, boy, or have you lost your senses – don't ride my pig, you'll break his back, may the Lord punish you!'

Later Costică went out into the street, where he had more scope for showing Nicu his tricks. As he was the elder, he felt it incumbent upon him to arouse the admiration of his playmate in every possible impudence toward his grandmother. After some time Mother Ioana shouted again from the cottage: 'Don't play in the street, boy, come into the yard; a cart might run over you, and then I'll be in trouble because of you!'

Soon after, another voice was heard from across the road. It was Vasile Zidaru's wife: 'Nicușor, come to mother, don't trail after that scatter-brain Costică! Come here, I've got something for you!'

Costică was playing at horses, running to and fro and neighing triumphantly each time he passed Nicu, who was so taken by this display that he didn't even hear his mother's voice.

Mother Ioana, furious at Zidaru's wife butting in, especially as she couldn't allow her grandson to be insulted, came out to the street gate, her hands wet from washing a basin: 'Costică! Now you come in, you little devil, why d'you have to run about in the street – isn't my yard big enough for you? Do you hear me? Either you come in or you go home!'

Without leaving off, the child whined: 'What am I doing wrong, granny? Why don't you let us play, we're not doing anything we shouldn't?' •

Disarmed, his grandmother muttered under her breath, banged the gate, and returned to her basin.

'Go back home, to hell, and don't plague me, for I've got no time to trail after you, devil take you!'

However, hardly had her hands touched the basin when the sound of a motor-horn was heard in the distance. Furious as she was, she still shouted to her darling grandson: 'Come in at once, or you'll get run over by that thing!'

Nicu, frightened, didn't wait for his mother to call, but hastily withdrew behind his gate, content to look through the bars. Costică, the hero, however, stuck himself in the middle of the road and boasted: 'Look, Nicu, I'm not afraid! Look, look!'

He stretched out his arms, looking like a bat with his wide sleeves hanging down and thrust out his tongue rudely at the car, which now appeared, approaching fast, the klaxon sounding stridently.

'Costică, where are you, watch out, devil take you!' the old woman's voice was heard from the cottage door.

The car was about fifty yards away, but the child did not move in spite of the angry warning of the klaxon. Observing his mischievous behaviour, the chauffeur endeavoured to swerve to the right to avoid him. Costică, however, also moved to the right, as if desiring at all costs to throw himself under the wheels of the car. With a sudden wrench at the wheel the chauffeur pulled the machine over to the left, but the child moved in the same direction with equal suddenness. The brakes of the machine screeched rustily accompanied by the shrieks of the lady passenger and the car came to a sudden halt. The next moment the chauffeur appeared near the boy, who still stood petrified with his tongue out, some two steps from the bonnet.

'Pull off his ears, Rudolf, to teach him how to behave, the little wretch!' shouted a gentleman with a tiny beard from the car.

The chauffeur shook the boy and boxed his ears then pushed him roughly towards the gate where Nicu stood dumbfounded, his mouth wide open and his nose running.

'That's where you should stand, you little villain, not in front of cars!'

As the car turned, lower down, into the Manor courtyard, Costică's yells filled the air, attracting the neighbours. Mother Ioana, terrified, arrived breathlessly: 'What is it, Costică, what happened?'

The child answered between sobs:

'I . . . I . . . was . . . was playing, and . . . oh, my ears, my ears!'

'What happened, Nicușor, you were here?' asked the old woman.

'The gentleman went for him, because he wouldn't get out of the way!' Nicu muttered, gasping with emotion.

'Serve you right! Very good!' Mother Ioana exclaimed. She had recovered herself. 'He should have wrung your neck, you little wretch. You don't listen, even if I shout myself hoarse! Get along with you off home. Go to hell, along with those who sent you.'

I nearly jumped out of my skin! Now get off home, or else I'll wallop you, you little fiend!

Howling, the child rose and without looking at anybody, started off along the road, holding his ears.

'Oh, they've pulled off my ears! Oh, oh, they've killed me!'

'Really, the boy's possessed!' a woman exclaimed, nodding her head.

'Come along home, Nicușor!' commanded Vasile Zidaru's wife, proudly taking her offspring by the hand. 'You're a good boy, aren't you? You're not cheeky, are you, Nicușor?'

Mother Ioana returned to her yard, crossing herself, and muttering: 'The devil take you!'

5

The press gallery in the Chamber was almost empty. Three reporters and Titu Herdelea discussed the chances of the government collapsing, while the veteran journalist from *Universul*, Bididiu, dozed wheezily in the special corner habitually reserved for him, ready for the debate. It was already past five, yet down in the Chamber only a few obscure deputies yawned wearily, serious as judges. But the public galleries were crammed. A young reporter, running his eyes over the crowd, and observing the number of purple, anxious, angry faces, observed: 'Only landowners and lease-holders in the gallery. As if the speeches made here could defend them against the fury of the peasants!'

Titu Herdelea knew that if he wanted to get news, he could only obtain it in the corridor downstairs. But he seldom came to the Chamber, and was too timid to descend like his specialist colleagues. At the moment, he was bored. The sophisticated arguments for and against the government bandied about between the other three did not interest him very much. He knew nothing of the backstage moves of the fight between and within the parties, and as for politicians, he only knew of those who were frequently mentioned in the press, and them only by name.

Suddenly a small, wizened, hunched-up journalist entered, mysteriously and importantly. It was Popescu Răcaru, from *Dimineata*. The *Universul* reporter roused himself and enquired, yawning: 'What's going on, *mon vieux*; does it start or doesn't it? For my part it can go to hell!'

'Sh! It's starting now!' exclaimed Răcaru. 'But the debate is nothing! Better listen to my news, it's an extraordinary sensation! The private secretary of the Minister of the Interior has just brought it in. It's hot stuff! He says that this morning in a little town on the

Danube – he didn't want to say where, but it must be Giurgiu – the reservists who had been called up turned against their officers, killing two and seriously wounding others. Then they dispersed to their own villages, taking their arms with them. Well? This is no joke! Imagine the panic the news produced in the government! So not even the army is safe. And the disturbances have reached Vlaşca. It seems, too, that news has been received from Ilfov, near Bucharest, that the peasants are in a ferment. Suppose they invade the capital, and the army goes over to them? It's said that the government is seriously considering asking for the assistance of the Austrian army, otherwise there is a danger of the country being turned completely upside down.'

This news caused consternation. Curious necks were craned from the adjoining public gallery. One of the journalists remarked, however: 'What a lot of tales there are circulating now, I could fall asleep listening to them.'

'What do you mean, fall asleep listening to my tales?' Popescu Răcaru retorted indignantly. 'Didn't I say that the news was hot, and brought by the private secretary of the Minister of the Interior? Somebody reported it in a group of deputies. Why, do we need any tales these days? As a matter of fact, I'm taking it straight to my paper, but I don't know if the government will allow us to print it.'

'I wouldn't even waste my energy reporting them!' announced Bididiu phlegmatically. 'It would be a waste of time. We only publish information bearing the official seal.'

'That's why your paper is the spokesman of the timorous!' said a young man, grinning aggressively.

'My dear boy, you can go on like that as long as you please!' drawled Bididiu, shrugging. 'Why, d'you think *Universul* belongs to me!'

Below, things began to liven up. Secretaries and clerks fussed around on the presidential platform. Ushers' voices could be heard in the corridors: 'Take your seats, please, gentlemen!'

As he examined the deputies below, Titu Herdelea caught sight of Gogu Ionescu, who was looking for his wife in the ladies' gallery. Having discovered her, he exchanged signals of greeting. Eugenia noticed young Herdelea, and indicated his presence to Gogu. Within a couple of minutes her husband appeared beneath the press gallery, and shouted to Titu: 'Fetch Eugenia at the end of the session and wait for me downstairs!'

Herdelea had only just observed Eugenia. She smiled at him in a friendly manner, and he greeted her with a respectful bow.

At last the proceedings began. The noise down below continued and around the President there was a murmur of official statements, summaries and other matters, to which nobody listened. A colourless

figure had drifted into the Ministerial benches. Then the commanding voice of the President announced: 'The deputy giving the report has the floor!'

A powerful-looking gentleman with a moustache mounted the rostrum and read in a strong baritone a bill for removing the tax on petrol. The lively conversation of the deputies on the benches drowned his words, as if they were ashamed to hear them.

'See what they're busy with at this moment; to make life easier for some thirty millionaires who travel around in cars!' muttered the *Universul* reporter, as he scribbled his notes.

A couple of moments later, the voices of the ushers were heard once more: 'The vote, please, gentlemen!'

'Come along, my friends, that's all!' said one of the reporters, gathering his papers and making his way out.

Titu Herdelea stayed behind until he had seen Gogu Ionescu parade in front of the ballot box, and then descended with Eugenia.

'Somebody told me, I don't know who, maybe Deliceanu, that you've been to Amara with Grigore,' Gogu said. He was most upset. 'How are things there? You can't think how worried we are. Imagine, my friend, Nadina has chosen this moment to go to the country and sell the estate! She left at noon today, by car. What do you think of that?'

Young Herdelea tried to calm him, saying that he himself had only arrived from Amara last night, and that peace and quiet had reigned there. Gogu, however, went on, almost in tears: 'Yes, but haven't you heard that in Vlaşca murder and pillage has begun? She goes to the country when there isn't even complete security in Bucharest. My God, I still can't believe that she has left! What capricious obstinacy! I've never met anybody like it! At such times you throw estates and money to the devil, just to save your life. Why this haste to sell the estate? I really don't know, she must be possessed; there's no other explanation.'

They took Titu home with them, made him stay for dinner, and talked about Nadina the whole evening.

6

The peasants were just discussing the fact that the lady had passed in her car on the way to boyar Miron's manor, when Pavel Tunsu's child approached, crying noisily.

'Oh, oh, they've pulled my ear off, oh, they've killed me!'

Vasile Zidaru, who stood on the edge of the crowd, enquired: 'Who's been walloping you, Costică, eh? Or don't you want to tell me? Come on, tell me who did it?'

Pavel Tunsu had gone home. As his father did not hasten up to see what Costică was crying about, the child realized that he could not be among the crowd. Thus he did not even bother to answer Vasile Zidaru, and went on his way bawling more loudly than ever, to advertise his woes so that all the village should know.

A woman who came up behind the child felt herself called upon to answer Vasile instead: 'The boyars shook him up a bit because he did not get out of the way of the car.'

Zidaru nodded, remarking: 'And haven't the gentry got anything better to do than to pick a quarrel with a child?'

Some two or three other peasants, who stood near him, added: 'That's right, why should they hit the child? After all, he hasn't swallowed up their fortune!'

Here Ignat became sore: 'It's not enough for them to torture us, now they start on our children too. They left mine starving, and took away my pig. All very nice, I must say!'

Others joined in: 'They'd better leave our children alone! What have they got against the poor kids? Can't they leave even them in peace? Oh Lord, how bitterly you punish us! Still, if we let them get away with it . . .! Supposing *we* took up sticks and tickled their backsides with them! I wonder if they'd treat us like fools then!'

Toader Strimbu, his face suffused and his eyes swollen, raged: 'If it had been my child I would have taught them a thing or two!'

In a group nearer the door of the inn, Trifon Guju, frowning as usual, but speaking in a precise, cool, calm voice, said: 'The boyars will only behave if we can frighten them!'

Voices mingled, entwined and competed. Groups formed sometimes here, sometimes there; listening, grumbling and cursing. The crowd eddied and moved, as if pushed hither and thither by a changeable wind. Cristea Busuoiu the innkeeper emerged on to his doorstep and when he had discovered the reason for the commotion, shouted to Trifon: 'You're talking about Pavel's son? The boy? Oh, let him go to the devil, he's a cheeky little sinner, a very imp of mischief! You cursed him yourself not long ago, Trifon, for doing something or other.'

The innkeeper's words were like cold water on burning embers. There followed a moment of dazed silence, as if the people had awoken from a nightmare. Trifon almost ashamed, muttered an acknowledgment: 'Well . . .'

But the voice of Petre Petre, filled with hatred, suddenly removed his hesitations: 'Why d'you curse the child, Uncle Christache? Just because the boyars hit him?'

And the embers, thus fanned while the fire was still within them, burst into flame again. Trifon, who had hardly had time to close his mouth on his last word, now continued angrily: 'Seems you're

partial to the boyars, after all. That's why you don't feel it in your heart. It doesn't hurt you when we're beaten up!

Busuioac sensed the fire burning in their hearts. And although only a moment ago it had seemed ridiculous to him that grown-up people should get upset merely because a child had justly had his ears boxed, a child known to all as the worst little devil in the village (how many weary days Pavel Tunsu had suffered through this son of his, only he knew). Busuioac, involuntarily drawn into the general whirlpool of indignation, burst out, swelling with fury: 'What's that you say, Trifon? I'm partial to the boyars? Aren't you ashamed to throw such insults in my face? Especially you, who've eaten so much of my food? Do you follow such types as Petre, who crawl round the manor all day, and then come here to argue with me?'

'Why d'you say I crawl, Uncle Christache?' shouted Petre, elbowing his way towards the innkeeper. 'What do you mean, "crawl"? Because I work at the boyars? Is that what you call crawling? Is it me or you who has been given a licence by the old boyar to sell drink, cheat the people, and fill your pockets with money? Just let me get to him, let him answer; I'm not going to let him wipe his feet on me in front of the whole village!'

'Well, you don't find a big mouth like yours every day, Petrică!' the innkeeper said appeasingly, seeing his violent gestures which his companions attempted to calm. 'A bumptious pup with a swollen head! I've watched you since you came back from the army, behaving as if you were the only man in the village! You wait a bit, my boy, you're still young! Let us live, too, and put in a word now and again!'

The more people barred his way, holding him back, and the more Busuioac softened his tone, the more did Petre's fury increase: 'Let me get past, Uncle Leonte!' he roared. 'Let me go, Uncle Toader, didn't you hear him insulting me? I want the fat lump to tell me what I've done wrong to be insulted like this!'

'Shut up, he hasn't hit you!' Leonte Orbişor said, tugging at his arm, pleased to be playing a part in the tussle.

'It would have been better if he'd knocked me on the jaw than used such words on me!' Petre cried, writhing away, but nevertheless somewhat mollified. 'I never took anything from him; I was never impudent with him - I just sided with the little chap!'

'That's how things are!' said Toader Strimbu, bitterly. 'When the boyars beat us, instead of hitting back, or at least crying out, we begin to fight each other for their beating!'

'Right enough, Toader!' Ignat Cercel muttered dismally. 'It's just as you say!'

'I'm not touchy, I'm not that type, but if someone sneers at me, no matter if it's the Lord himself, I don't let it rest till I've paid him

back in full and with interest too!' exclaimed Petre, straightening his clothes.

Just when everything was blowing over, Pavel Tunsu arrived, with a funereal expression on his face. The peasants crowded round him as a new exhibit, hanging on his words. The innkeeper, seeking to atone for the previous incident, broke the ice.

'What's up with your boy, Pavel? What did the boyars do to him?'

'Oh, don't ask me, Cristache, let me be! Nobody under the sun is as wretched as I am!' the peasant burst out, in a voice which expressed hatred rather than misery.

Bit by bit he told them what had happened and how: that Costică had been sitting by the gate outside his grandmother's, quietly playing with Vasile Zidaru's child, that the car had come, and the children, partly frightened, and partly in their innocent fun, had quietly stayed where they were, watching the car, like the people here had done when it had passed just previously. What the boyars in the car had thought, or not, God only knows, but the car had stopped and the German had suddenly jumped out and rushed at the children. Nicușor, Vasile's little boy, who was younger and more frightened, had cleared off into his yard, luckily for him, otherwise he might have suffered even more than his playmate. But because he had no reason to feel guilty, Costică had stayed quietly where he was, he had even wondered what the German had meant by continually sounding his horn. The latter, however, had immediately caught hold of the lad by his ears, pulling and twisting them until they were shapeless. He had then hit him and kicked him until the child was absolutely flattened out. Having beaten him to his heart's content, the German had cursed the child in his own tongue, and returned to the car, after which he had gone to the devil, to the old boyar's.

'And now the boy's ears have started running, and they're all inflamed, may the Holy Mother of God punish the evil-doers!' Pavel went on, crossing himself as though by the altar. 'I left my wife at home poulticing him, and I've sent old mother Nastasia from Nistor's to help, because she's old and wise and cured Zamfir's daughter two years ago, when the threshers crushed her hand. Uncle Luca advised me, when I was coming here, to take the boy to the hospital in Pitești, and I will, I can't do anything else, my heart bleeds for his suffering, poor little thing. I only hope it won't be in vain, to spend, I don't know how much and still have him disabled for the rest of his life. Oh dear!'

He ended on a sigh, with a gesture of desperation. The peasants, who had been nodding their heads in sympathy, were silent. After a few moments Vasile Zidaru said slowly, as if a burden was lifting

from his heart: 'I was wondering how a little boy could have dared to have done mischief to the boyars!'

Dozens of voices now, in various tones, expressed agreement: 'No, no, how could a child dare?'

But above them all the voice of the innkeeper, Busuioc, could be heard, almost commandingly: 'Why don't you take your child by the hand, Pavel, and go with him, all miserable and poulticed as he is, to the manor, and ask them to make recompense for his pain, now - at once?'

Pavel turned his head towards the innkeeper, in confusion. Around him other voices loudly urged: 'Go on, Pavel. Cristea's right; don't hesitate! They must pay you!'

Finally he muttered hesitantly: 'Oh Lord, d'you want me to get a beating, too? They won't be worried by such a shadow of a man!'

'Come on, Pavel, I'll go with you!' volunteered Petre, pulling his coat over his shoulders.

'Let's all go!' shouted a sturdy little man, with a gigantic *căciulă* pushed to the back of his head. 'After all, they can't beat all of us!'

'Shut up, Gavrilă, don't be childish!' admonished Ignat Cercel quickly. 'Didn't we all go some time ago for Mr Nica, and didn't boyar Miron drive us away like dogs?'

'Well, if we let ourselves be treated like we did then, of course they'll drive us away!' Trifon Guju remarked in a deep, dejected voice.

'Why should we let them? We shouldn't! We're not dogs!' burst out of number of voices simultaneously.

'Better set fire to them and reduce them all to dust and ashes!' shouted a lonely, thin voice, like a scarlet thread, as clear as if it had come from above.

All eyes turned to Melinte Heruvim, who held his head high, to indicate that he did not take back his words. At that moment, however, the all-pervading sound of an approaching car came from down the road.

'It's coming, it's coming!' whispered many voices, filled with dread, and suddenly seeming to have forgotten Melinte's exhortation.

The crowd of peasants, filling the space where the Sunday *hora* had been danced and stretching across the road from one side to the other, stood immovably, as if to bar the way. Nevertheless, when the car appeared, someone cried out conciliatingly: 'Get out of the way, lads, it's coming!'

Slowly and stiffly, the peasants made way, crowding on to the edge of the road. The car shrilly and persistently sounded its furious warning, the drone of the engine and the regular explosions issuing from the exhaust becoming clearer as it approached, drowning the voices and all the village noises. The people, lined up rigidly on

each side of the road, like mediaeval guards, watched it rushing past with misty eyes and darkened faces. Only Busuioc, the innkeeper, removed his *căciulă* and made the usual respectful bow from the doorway of the inn. A delicate hand emerged in answer from the car, giving a friendly wave. At the same moment, unable to contain himself any longer, Petre Petre rushed out into the middle of the road and shouted furiously after the machine.

'Boo! . . . Boo! . . .'

Some hundred tongues took up the sound in revolt and Trifon Guju, snatching up a stone, flung it after the machine, grinding his teeth and muttering: 'You bloody thieves!'

But the sound of the engine drowned the boos of the people. The gentleman with the little beard, however, turning round for a moment as if sensing something, saw the infuriated faces and raised fists of the peasants and Trifon Guju hurling the stone. Dazed and horrified, the gentleman quickly turned back, his head, cringing away from the missile. The fainter the sound of the engines became, the louder swelled the hubbub among the crowd of peasants in the middle of the road, one hoarse voice emerging like a command: 'You sons of bitches! You buggars!'

Chapter Eight

THE FLAMES

I

The next morning, which was Wednesday, Platamonu arrived in his chaise at Lespezi together with Olimp Stavrat, the lawyer, whom he had put up at Glicanu.

'Here we are, Mr Lawyer, we've arrived safely!' said the leaseholder, who had been driving. Stavrat was seated up in front with him, and behind sat Aristide.

'I see we've arrived, but I don't know how safe we are. We'll find that out later!' Stavrat retorted, crossly stroking his little beard, streaked with grey, and gazing around him all the time, as if fearing that a mob of insurgent peasants might leap out from somewhere at any moment.

'Don't worry, my dear sir!' Platamonu went on, so patronizingly that his voice sounded sarcastic. 'People here are not as mad as they think in the towns! The peasant is very well-behaved by nature – perhaps too well-behaved!'

But the lawyer was not to be consoled by such philosophical words. He was in a permanent state of terror, picturing dangers in such ghastly colours that he saw spectres everywhere, and cursing the moment when he had fallen in with the caprice of an irresponsible woman. What had been lacking in his peace and security in Bucharest to make him indulge in such rural adventures in regions overcome with the horrors of revolt? Would it not have been more appropriate for him, an elderly gentleman, to have only read about these disturbances in the papers at home, seated in his armchair, sipping sweet Turkish coffee and smoking a cigar, instead of trembling here? He knew very well from past experience that to bring sentiment into business relations compromised both the sentiment and the business. What had come over him to get involved with his client in such a stupid manner? Certainly she was beautiful and desirable, but look where it had landed him. Even if he had profited in any way – but . . . Up to the moment she hadn't even paid his fees for the divorce. All he had received was the deposit,

and he had treated her as a distinguished client. He would never forgive himself, especially for not having refused to leave at the last moment, when all the newspapers had been reporting disorders and violence throughout the country. He felt he might at least have stayed in Pitești, where the army was stationed, after he had seen the fierce expressions of groups of peasants in all the villages they had passed through; whispering heaven knew what, and plotting in broad daylight and in full view. All night he had tossed sleeplessly in his bed, making sure innumerable times that the door was firmly locked, and starting with horror at every noise outside. He did not have too much confidence in the lease-holder either, however amiable he might be. Who could guarantee that the Greek had no secret contact with the peasants, so that the lawyer might suddenly find the villains in his very room?

Before turning in at the gate of the manor, Stavrat caught sight of a group of five peasants in a yard.

'Look, there they are!' he said staring, and pointing them out to the lease-holder.

'They're decent people, Sir!' said Platamonu soothingly. 'I'll guarantee them! I know them very well! The one with the white *căciulă* is Matei Dulmanu, a man of standing, and with a heart. Maybe you will have to deal with him personally, because he is one of those peasants who joined up with others to buy Madame Nadina's estate!'

Lawyer Stavrat had stopped twice yesterday at Miron Iuga's place, both on arrival and on his departure, though he had not entered the old manor itself. Now he scrutinized the buildings and the yard here, as if he had never seen them before, remarking gloomily: 'There's no security in these manors at all. Everything lies open, anybody who wants to can enter, strangle you, set fire to everything, and leave, without anyone stopping them.'

Platamonu did not even bother to answer, except with a smile. While Aristide, sitting behind them, his hands across his mouth, laughed at the lawyer's timidity. Actually, the manor was rather neglected, especially the outhouses. Its upkeep was the responsibility of the lease-holder, who had the right to use it as he desired, except for the main building, which Gogu Ionescu had restored some years ago, and kept for himself and his wife. Platamonu used most of the outhouses for storage. The stables and sties were almost empty; only containing the horse belonging to the caretaker, Dumitru Ciulici, a milch cow, and several chickens for the boyars when they spent a couple of days here. If they stayed longer, the lease-holder sent in provisions from Gliganu. Only Dumitru Ciulici and his family, composed of his wife and four children, occupied the whole vast area of the manor buildings. The lease-holder had found him

there and kept him on, for he was a dependable man. His wife had been a cook in Pitești, and knew how to cater for boyars. The eldest girl, Ileana, had gone into service at the manor, and was as good as any town housekeeper. For other needs Dumitru usually brought staff in from the village. The place seldom came to life, only when a number of boyars gathered there; then the manor was full of people, bustle and noise.

The chauffeur was now cleaning the car, in a barn, energetically whistling a German tune. Several ducks and hens wandered about the yard, enjoying the warmth of the sun. Dumitru Ciulici, a slightly bent man, with a bony face, hurried to help the boyars alight. In answer to a question, he informed Platamonu that after a good night's rest the lady had risen, and was now doing herself up in front of the mirror.

From the porch which sheltered the entrance, the lease-holder led Stavrat into a large hall, where they waited a couple of moments until Ileana appeared and announced that the lady was coming soon, and they should go into the drawing room. This was to the left, alongside a sort of study where Gogu Ionescu worked; on the right lay the dining room, separated by another smaller room from the bedroom, which in its turn, communicated directly with the hall. Gogu had divided the little room in between into two, and installed a modern bathroom, which opened only into the bedroom. From the back of the dining-room, a corridor ran to a little room which had been made into an office. Then came the big kitchen, and further on the servant's quarters, in which Dumitru Ciulici lived with his family.

Nadina looked fresh and lovely. A rosy joy shone from her face.

'Well, my hero, and are you still frightened?' she enquired, sweetly mocking, of Stavrat. 'Oh, if I had known you would be so cautious, I would have spared you: I would have asked another lawyer!'

'You are joking, madam, because you have no experience of life!' the lawyer muttered anxiously. 'Unfortunately I . . .'

'Now, please, enough of your lamentations, Mr Stavrat!' Nadina went on seriously. 'Or are you deliberately trying to make me sorry that I have come? You may be sure that I shan't be! On the contrary, the country now seems more interesting than it ever did before! This is the most superb spring - or maybe it just seems that way to me because I am . . . But let's talk business!'

The two men exchanged glances of comprehension, they had already discussed matters quietly last night after dinner, continuing until midnight. The conversation had suited the lawyer for it had delayed his retirement to bed, which he had dreaded. Platamonu had explained, and Stavrat had agreed, that the lady had first of all

to decide to whom she would sell, so that negotiations could start in earnest. Talking to a number of clients at once, without tackling practical details, meant waste of time and unnecessary worry for all. He, Platamonu, had the right to first preference, but he didn't want people to say that he had forced the lady's hand. He was sure that if the estate were sold, it would be sold to him, for only he knew what it was worth and what it would bring. The lady would have been wiser to have concluded the transaction when he had first suggested the deal and had pressed the matter. However, at the time Nadina had not wanted to do business. Now, the situation was less favourable to her. During the present disturbances, everybody feared to sink his capital into landed property, for no one knew what the morrow would bring. As far as he was concerned, at present he would consider no more than an option, at most, with the stipulation that a possible final settlement be made only after the situation had calmed down a little.

Nadina now listened somewhat impatiently to the lawyer's objections and scruples, unwilling to interrupt and tell him that it was precisely because she did not know how to handle these matters that she had called him in and not in order to demonstrate and multiply existing difficulties. Finally she said: 'I have already told you, if my memory serves me, that I would sell to the highest bidder who was paying cash down. That leaves the details to be settled by you.'

'Yes, but we can't have a public auction!', objected Stavrat.

'Well, can't we hear what each offers, and then decide?' Nadina asked, smiling.

'Perhaps in different circumstances, madam, if I may be allowed to interrupt!' interposed Platamonu. 'At this juncture, however, such experiments are inappropriate.'

'You mean because of the peasants,' Nadina answered. 'Well, I shan't shrink from selling to the peasants. I promised them that I'd negotiate with them when the time came. So all we have to do is to call them!'

'I think it would be useless, madam!' the lease-holder interrupted once more. 'Even when the peasants tried hard to buy, they thought in terms of a lower price and easy terms of payment, for they have no capital apart from their labour.'

'Oh, of course, not under such conditions!' exclaimed Nadina.

'They want your property now, too, of course, but they want it free!' Platamonu continued.

'How do you mean, free? How could they have it?' *

'By the land being divided among them without payment!'

'Why, what an idea!'

'Nevertheless, they hope and wait, because that's how the wind blows now!' the lease-holder said.

'It's a little anachronistic to show amazement at the aspirations of the peasants, when we all know from the newspapers that they have actually implemented these aspirations in a most practical manner in many places!' Stavrat muttered. 'There is no doubt that the present moment is not the most propitious for negotiations concerning the sale of an estate, especially on the spot. These preliminaries could very well have been carried out in Bucharest.'

'I understand your objections,' Nadina retorted crossly, 'but why didn't you make them in Bucharest?'

'I did warn you that the journey into the country was dangerous, but you wouldn't listen to me.'

'Let's have done with the journey and its dangers; if you had told me that the transaction could not be done now, or that it could have been done better in Bucharest, then . . .'

'You're right, madam; I was negligent, I admit . . .'

The lawyer felt himself responsible for his rash action in leaving Bucharest, and not for failing to give her the right advice. Hence he was no longer interested in her business, but only in his own troubles. He was now wondering if he could manage matters so that tonight he should not be sleeping at Gliganu, but should at least be on the way to Bucharest. He had not dared to tell Nadina or the lease-holder what he had seen yesterday at Amara, when he had turned his head in the car; they would not have believed him, and would have laughed at him. Even he himself was not absolutely certain, it might have been the pure imagination of a nervous man. But even if this had been so, the whole thing might be reality tomorrow, and why should he, an old man in full control of his senses, take the risk of being slaughtered by mad peasants? On the contrary, he must take advantage of an opportunity of salvation while he could.

'You must have a little patience, madam,' Platamonu resumed. 'You've done very well in coming, to show the people that you won't get rid of the estate as they said you would. It's only a matter of a day or so until all this excitement about the uprisings subsides. In fact, the prefect himself, who is in the country, is passing through here today, to speak to the peasants, quieten them, and get these ideas out of their heads.'

'And what about old Mr Iuga?' Nadina asked. 'I only had time to say good-day to him yesterday. It's impossible for me to back out. We must talk to him as well, so that he shouldn't think I intend to . . .'

'No, no, madam,' said the lease-holder, 'You may be sure that he would not think of negotiating now! Stay here quietly and rest for the time being, and we'll see what tomorrow will bring. If Mr Iuga wants to say something to you, he will send you a message, don't worry!'

Dissatisfied with this solution, although she had to admit its logic, Nadina suddenly said candidly, as if awakening: 'Then why did I come, after all? If I have to wait until this storm passes, as Mr Stavrat now tells me . . . Why did I trouble to come?'

'Don't regret it, my lady!' Platamonu soothed her. 'You've had a pleasant journey, and – with God's help – will do good business!' The conversation prolonged itself for some two hours, as they went round and round the same questions, with the same answers and conclusions. Nadina invited Stavrat to stay and keep her company for lunch. The lease-holder withdrew, promising that he would come back later in the evening to take the lawyer home.

'I hope you'll pay court to me and not frighten me with nasty stories about the peasants!' Nadina said humorously to Stavrat, as Platamonu made his farewells.

Olimp Stavrat was bewildered; he caressed his beard and gave her a smile in which gallantry fought with anxiety.

Meanwhile, Aristide waited impatiently in the courtyard, having given Ileana a slight pinch right in front of her father, with whom he had started a conversation about the disturbances in other parts, just to while away the time. Dumitru was gravely interested to find out whether it was true that land was to be given to the peasants.

'Come on, my boy, we've finished!' called Platamonu, hurriedly descending from the porch, and getting straight into the chaise. 'Come along,' he said again to Aristide, in a lower tone, 'your mother might be getting anxious!'

As they emerged into the road they met Matei Dulmanu and the rest of the group they had seen before, who seemed to be waiting for them. Dulmanu signed to them to stop, and came over.

'What is it, Matei, what's the matter?' enquired the lease-holder, friendly as always.

The peasant passed round under the head of the horse to Platamonu. His expression was darker than usual, and there was a hidden gleam in his eyes. Placing one foot on the step, he bent over and whispered in the lease-holder's ear: 'Listen, sir, leave Babaroaga alone, otherwise it'll be the worse for you!'

Platamonu paled, but in order to hide his feelings he went on in the same mild tone: 'What's the matter now? Haven't I told you that I won't meddle if you're going to take it?'

'Then why's the lady here?' the peasant asked suspiciously.

'Well, she may want to sell it; it's her estate, after all!'

'Still, you shouldn't interfere, we can't let anybody else take the land away from us!' said Matei Dulmanu threateningly.

'You needn't worry about me, my good fellow! You must come to terms with the lady!' the lease-holder stammered in a voice which sought to be patronizing, but did not succeed.

'Well, we'll see what about her!' the peasant said. 'That's all, sir, and don't say I didn't warn you!'

'My word is sacred, Matei!' Platamonu answered, somewhat more sure of himself. 'When I speak, it comes from my heart! You can be sure of that, Matei. Goodbye!'

The peasant moved to one side, muttering to himself, as the lease-holder urged on his horse: 'Giddy-up there, Ortac! . . . Come on, it's late. Giddy-up.'

2

'I wonder what's the matter with the people; staying hidden away at home?' Busuioc remarked going to his doorway once again and looking down the street. 'Customers like you don't bring in much, Spiridon!'

Spiridon Răgălie had bought himself a nip of plum brandy and paid for it. He would have asked for more, but he knew that Busuioc would not give him any credit. His name was already in the book, and he had not given anything towards lessening his debt. He answered in pleasant voice, to stay on the right side of the innkeeper: 'Probably they've started to clean their ploughs, as the weather has improved, so as to be ready for the division of the land.'

'Oh yes, of course, you've noticed how the boyars are falling over one another to give away their estates?' remarked Busuioc ironically over his shoulder in the doorway. Turning round and going back to the bar, he added: 'You're a drunken sot, Spiridon, but at least you have more common sense than the rest, you don't sweat for nothing!'

The peasant, a frail old man, put on a miserable expression and answered whiningly: 'Others drink because it makes them happy, but I drink because of my poverty and troubles, Uncle Cristache! Since my old woman died, that's all my life has been. My daughter-in-law's got no time for me, she curses me and doesn't want to look after me!'

'I know your story inside out, let it be, daddy Spiridon!' said the innkeeper crushingly.

'Of course you do, you know it very well,' the old man muttered, hurt, turning his eyes towards the open door, where Filip Ilcoasa's child was just entering, clean, and wearing shoes: 'Grandad sent me for - sent me for . . .!' the child shouted shrilly, pressing against the bar, and running his eyes over the shelves behind.

'What did grandad send you for Anton?' asked Busuioc, smiling.

'For . . . for . . . a kilogram of petrol, but in your bottle, because ours is broken!' said the child, delighted that he had at last remembered.

'Have you got the money, or . . . ?'

'Here it is!' said Antonel proudly, showing the money he was gripping tightly in his fist.

Mrs Dragos had just come back from Pitești, where she had been to see her husband in prison. She came as far as Costești in the train, but made her way as best she could for the rest of the distance. No cab-driver was bold enough to leave for the country, although the teacher's wife would have paid well.

She came home even more miserable than she had set out. The whole of Monday she had spent at the doors of officials, but in vain. The public prosecutor had only agreed, most reluctantly, to hand Dragoș the food and money she had brought. Nevertheless, she had not allowed herself to be beaten. Yesterday, Tuesday, she had changed her tactics, giving some money to one of the lesser officials, and in this way, had managed to see Ionel for a couple of minutes. Even now he did not know why he had been arrested, for no one had told him or had even asked him anything, but he was convinced that he was being kept there to prevent him from setting the peasants against the boyars. Telling her this, poor Ionel had even laughed, saying that it was better that he should be away from Amara, for if he had been at home, and something had happened in the village, he alone would have been held responsible for everything by the boyars.

Florica wept as she told her story to the old people, who wrung their hands as they listened.

'Never mind, we shan't suffer very much longer: we'll give them what they deserve!' Nicolae Dragoș muttered suddenly his face black with fury.

'You must be quiet, Nicolae, and have nothing to do with the people and their wickedness!' exclaimed Florica, wiping her tears. 'If things don't go well, all the guilt will be placed on Ionel again. They'll say that he taught you to . . .

'Even if I know that they'll cut me to pieces and throw me to the dogs, I won't let things rest until I pay everybody what he deserves!' he answered. 'It doesn't matter how cross you are; I wouldn't listen to the Lord himself!'

'Hallo, Trifon!' cried Leonte Orbișor pausing in the road with his hoe over his shoulder. 'You starting to work?'

'Well, what can I do? Just around the house!' answered Trifon Guju from the porch, from whence came the sound of metal against stone.

'Are you sharpening your scythe, Trifon or . . . ' enquired Leonte without thinking.

'Yes, I am, so that it shall be ready!' answered Trifon, without raising his head.

'It seems to me you want to mow before you sow!'

'Well, if I have to . . . Yes!'

The cart turned into the gate, which stood open as always. Marin Stan, using a stick in his hand, as a whip, shouted from behind the empty cart to the children who played in the yard: 'Out of the way, boys, get away from under the feet of the oxen! Get out of the way!'

Then, as the animals suddenly rushed forward towards the back of the yard, he anxiously hurried in front of them.

'May the devil take you, you daft things! Where are you off to? Whoa . . . Whoa there! I'll give you a good drubbing! Whoa! Have you gone mad? D'you think you can do anything you want, like the boyars? I'll show you!'

He lashed at them wildly, first one, then the other, with the thin end of the stick, muttering through clenched teeth: 'Don't you be like the boyars, the devil take you!'

'I don't know what to do, father-in-law!' said Filip Illoasa to Father Nicodim, who sat on a chair in the sunny veranda. 'The weather is improving, the earth has dried, and I'm wondering what I should do. Should I start ploughing? I can't just stay doing nothing but I see that other people . . . '

He relapsed into an enquiring silence. The priest had been depressed, both by his old age and because he was pining for his son, who became an obsession with him as he grew weaker. He had been ill the whole winter, with one thing and the other, and he kept saying that he would not last until the summer. But with the first rays of the spring sun he had grown more cheerful and regained his interest in life. Concerned, he answered his son-in-law, who stood at his side, stolid and heavy, like a block of wood.

'Well, Filip, we should, but if the people do. . . . '

Then he added, in a different tone: 'I wonder what the people are expecting, that they don't start work!'

'They just follow each other, persuading one another,' Filip muttered. 'But time has passed, and the fact is that we are still without any contract with the boyar, just with our land.'

Niculina brought in a mug of hot milk for her father. Filip had discussed the matter with her also a short time before and she burst out in her usual forthright manner:

'The people have gone quite mad, they're running after mares' nests. In the end they'll all starve - you see if I'm not right!'

'The worst of it is that we don't know whether it will be one way or the other!' said Filip heavily. 'We must find out what to do!'

'We can't act against the people,' the priest said, warming his hands round the mug. 'We do what everybody else does, we can't do otherwise.'

'If the people start doing wicked things, Filip will have nothing to do with it, because he's a man with a big family and he can't afford to be influenced by scatterbrains who do damage and loot people, like they did with our meat last autumn,' Niculina went on indignantly. 'Nobody will give us food, nor stand up for us. I've had my own experience of these people, and I don't want to hear about them any more!'

Approving his wife's energetic manner, Filip ponderously announced: 'The world has become so evil and low that it can't go any lower!'

A moment later, Niculina suddenly murmured anxiously as though she had just remembered: 'I wonder what's happened to Antonel. Why hasn't he come back with the petrol from the inn, he's been gone a long time, and ...'

'Dry up, woman! D'you hear me? If you don't shut your gob, I'll shut it in such a way as you'll never forget it! Don't you try telling me what I must do and mustn't do!' Ignat Cercel shouted furiously to his wife, who kept nagging at him from the cottage doorway, as he pottered around in the yard.

'Oh, it's easy for you to curse! You're off all over the place all day long, but what about me? What'll happen to me and the children, tell me? What can I fill their mouths with? I've begged and borrowed from all the neighbours and they've had enough of it! Nobody's going to give me even a handful more maize-flour!'

Ignat knew his wife was right, and so grew even angrier. As he had nothing else to do, he had started mending the fence, chopping and hammering like one possessed. He paused for a moment, resting his axe on the block: 'Don't you understand when you're spoken to decently, woman? What do you want me to do? Hang myself? Right, I'll go and do it, then you'll be satisfied! You've no patience, just like everybody else. You keep nagging away like a yapping dog,

not like a human being! Can't you see that we're all doing our best, and the Lord must help us!

The woman continued to grumble in a plaintive voice, irritating him beyond endurance. His dog lay quietly nearby in the sun, bony, miserable and hungry. Looking at him, Ignat was overcome with blind rage, as if the very resignation of the dog was mocking him and suddenly kicked at it, so that it rolled over and over a few paces away from him.

'Go to hell, don't get under my feet!'

The dog gave a long, woeful howl, the very sound of which soothed his master. His feelings thus eased, he resumed his work on the fence, muttering: 'The devil take you!'

'Hello . . . hallo . . . yes yes, Amara police station here. This is the chief officer, Sergeant Boiangiu, speaking! . . . What's that? . . . Is that you, Popescu? Bless you, I didn't recognize your voice! . . . Everything's quiet here, Popescu! How are things at your end, in Izvoru? . . . All right too? What's that you say? They set fire to the manor? Where? In Dobrești? Oh, Teleorinan! . . . That's a good way off, in the middle of the county. Yes, but it's a nasty affair just the same. What did the police do? Oh, they haven't got any there! . . . That must be why, otherwise . . . Go on, go on, Popescu, I'm listening! . . . The prefect and the inspector left Izvoru an hour ago? . . . Very good. I know they're coming. I'm expecting them, but thanks all the same. They won't arrive before the afternoon, will they? . . . All right, all right. I'll let you know immediately if anything happens here, and you do the same thing from your end. All right, Popescu! Goodbye and good luck! How is Madam Popescu, all right? My Didina is very well, thanks! . . . And the same from us! . . .'

As Boiangiu spoke on the telephone he made desperate signs to his wife to keep quiet until he had finished. Hanging up the receiver, he said wearily: 'Well, what do you want? Can't you see I'm busy.'

Mrs Boiangiu was a regular reader of *Universul* and was horrified at the reports that the disturbances among the peasants were steadily on the increase. Crime and other sensations in which she was normally interested now paled into insignificance. Since she had read in the last couple of days about people fleeing into the towns, she had continually asked her husband what was to become of her; was she to stay here to be murdered by the peasants? The sergeant felt that his military courage was being undermined by her intention to take to flight, and to make matters worse, she talked about the news in front of his men, and civilians too, thus demoraliz-

ing them and spreading the idea of revolt among the peasants. First he had warned her politely, then he had cursed her, but the lady continued: 'What have you decided about me? Do you keep me here to . . .'

'Now listen, Didina. You're driving me out of my wits!' her husband burst out, taking advantage of the fact that they were alone. 'Didn't you hear with your own ears that the prefect and the inspector are coming?'

'Yes, I did, but . . .'

'Then leave me alone! I'll throw your damn *Universul* into the fire! I can't even carry out my duties in peace, because of your whining! You keep on and on saying that the peasants are going to kill you! It seems you've gone off your head! If they kill you, they'll kill us both together – that's why I married you, and raised you from a nonentity to an officer's wife!'

Didina left the room in tears, crying. 'May God punish you for sneering at my misery! Go to hell!'

'Oh God, how I suffer, Melinte, and death will not come and take me and save us all! Ever since last autumn I've been kept to my bed! I've pleaded with the Lord to take pity on my children; my heart bleeds when I see how hungry and ragged the poor little things are! Oh, I'm finished, I'm going to choke . . . I can't breathe . . . See how cold my hands are! . . . Oh, holy Mother of God!'

The air of the hovel was heavy with the odour of sweat and the moaning of the sick woman. Sunlight filtered through the dirty window. A green log hissed and sent up wisps of smoke from the hearth. The two-year-old boy hummed happily as he played with the black-and-white cat on the damp earthen floor at the foot of the bed.

Melinte Heruvim stood near the wooden bed, his hands clasped in front of him, bending over the sick woman with sad, pitiful eyes. His hollow jaundiced cheeks trembled as he felt his stomach rumble with hunger so much he feared she might hear it. After some time he asked: 'Is the pain very bad?'

Her features relaxed for a moment, as if his voice brought comfort, and she answered with the beginning of a smile: 'It doesn't hurt, only . . . Oh Lord!'

She convulsed like an injured animal.

A few minutes later her girl of five rushed in, red with rage, and began to complain from the doorway: 'Dad, Păvăluc said to me . . . and I said . . . and he said . . .'

'Go back to play with the children outside, Lenuță, run along. Your Mum is ill, and . . .'

The girl did not stay to hear the end, but went out satisfied, and began to shout from the entrance: 'Păvăluc, Dad said that . . .'

Leonte Bumbu rushed in to tell his wife that he had just had news from some people on their way to Mozăceni in a cart. Further down in the valley, in Teleorman, he said, they had encountered crowds of peasants roaming from village to village, driving out the boyars, confiscating their estates, and setting fire to the manors to make sure that they would not come back.

The steward was more worried than the boyar himself that the peasants might revolt, although, as he said to his wife, he had not persecuted anybody, and had helped where he could, so there was no need to be afraid. All the same, he added, when the peasants lose their heads they don't take any of that into account. He had a number of confidants who told him what was going on in the village, always assuring him that everyone loved him like a brother, but still, he did not place too much faith in their assurances, for he knew what assurances he himself made to old Miron, and how much truth there was in them. The fact was that he needed no information to know full well that there was a commotion among the peasants, and that they were preparing something, without themselves really knowing what. And now, if they found out what was going on in other parts, it would not be surprising if they rose here, too, and began to commit crimes. People were very bitter, and anything might be expected from them. As his wife soothed him, saying that there was a just and merciful God who would defend them, a manor servant entered, and nervously announced that the boyar wanted him at once.

'Tell me, what are our men, who normally work here, doing now?' Miron enquired. 'Are we waiting for the revolution, too, like the other wretches? We can't do anything about those poor creatures. They're intoxicated by the agitation of the street-arabs and we must wait until they've come to their senses. But we're still sober, Leonte! We must look to our own affairs, Leonte. If we can't start work in the fields, at least we can put them to work in the garden and the grounds. Spring has arrived, and it's a disgrace that it should find us in this state!'

'Very good, sir; I understand!' the steward replied, like a corporal before a general.

'And we mustn't forget that Madame Nețina is here, and that in the afternoon the prefect is coming, and . . .'

'Where've you been, Toader?' Serafim Mogoș asked, as he came out into the road.

'Only to Vaideei. I've just been to see my *cuscru*¹¹ to Zaharia,' Toader Strîmbu answered, pausing.

They discussed the weather, the soil and their poverty. Toader said that he had heard in Vaideei that in other parts people had snatched up what they could and driven out the boyars, and everyone had taken as much land as he needed.

'Oh Lord, it doesn't seem to come here at all; if it did I should have a little of the boyar's maize to feed my children. Oh, what a hard winter we've had!' Toader Strîmbu sighed.

'For my part, all I want is to get a couple of good bashes at that sergeant, you know, real good bashes, so that he'll remember me even in his grave!' Serafim Mogoș said between clenched teeth, his face darkening as though poison filled his veins. 'That's what I want, Toader – then they can cut my head off if they like!'

The best chaise, with the best horses, had been waiting at the foot of the steps for an hour, loaded with all kinds of bundles, and Cosma Buruiană still could not find it in his heart to leave. Two servants and the watchman, Iacob Mitruțoiu, fidgeted around the chaise, helping and re-arranging.

Eventually the lease-holder appeared with his wife and the children, each carrying a little box or parcel. Lazăr Oduduie, a servant who was in Cosma's confidence, followed them, bare-headed and respectfully listening to the flow of instructions, while Mrs Buruiană and the children arranged themselves in the chaise among the luggage. The lease-holder continued to address Lazăr: 'So, Lazăr . . . I hope everything is clear? You must look after everything, and don't leave the house unattended to go to the inn or after some other silly business.'

'Oh sir, really!' Oduduie protested. 'Don't you know me better?'

'All right, all right, but you must take great care, Lazăr!' emphasized Cosma Buruiană, climbing up next to the driver.

'Right, sir!' he said, bowing, but adding a moment later, slightly perplexed: 'I beg your pardon for asking, sir, but I should know . . . You won't be returning?'

'What's that, Lazăr?' the lease-holder cried. 'What d'you mean, not return? Why not? such nonsense! D'you think I'm going to leave my property just like that? Why? Is there any reason? How can you suggest such a thing, Lazăr? No, my man, we'll be back here tonight, didn't I tell you? Or maybe I didn't . . . We'll be back tonight, sooner or later, as God wills. We're only going to Cătești, to do some shopping for the children, for summer's coming. Pitești's too far. I hope all goes well with you, Lazăr, goodbye! . . . Let's go, driver!'

The driver started up the horses, and the chaise croaked into movement, turning to the right, through the gate. As it disappeared, one of the servants remarked with a laugh: 'That's one gone with the wind! It's as likely he'll return as I'll stay here!'

'He can return when I call for him!' muttered Iacob Mitruțoiu.

'Shut your traps, you lot!' Lazăr Oduduie said automatically, but without much conviction.

'What wind blew you in, Luca? Sit yourself down! Come on, old lady, give him a chair, and don't get flustered, he hasn't come to look for a bride!' said Lupu Chirițoiu, as Luca Talabă entered his cottage.

'Don't bother, mother Paraschiva, I've been sitting long enough!' Luca exclaimed, seating himself nevertheless.

He had come to discuss with Father Lupu what to do about Babaroaga, which cost him his sleep even now. When the idea had been to buy it honestly, as was proper, he had done his best; sweating and struggling in every direction. Even now, he wouldn't let the matter drop, but he heard people saying that they wanted to dig their ploughshares into the land without any agreement, everyone just taking what he could.

'I tell you straight, I've never meddled in such matters up to now, Father Lupu, and I don't like them! Now people come to tempt me, first one, then the other, saying that we shouldn't let things rest, and that once we started, we have to finish it. I say, "All right, we started it, but you've shifted your ground!" "Yes, we have, they say, because now our justice has come and it's only right that all the estates should be ours." I can see it all, but still they won't leave me in peace; they're driving me mad!'

'Oh, I tell everybody that I mind my own business, I don't meddle and I don't get mixed up in things!' old Lupu said defensively. 'My white hair has seen these things before. Just the same it was; it would be like this and it would be like that, and then the flood came! No, no, it's no good, Luca!'

In the Vlăduța dining room, a maid was setting the table for one person for the first time. Yesterday, the young ladies had left for town, and the colonel had come home late, having eaten well. First she put the things where the colonel usually sat, but the table seemed too bare. So she moved the plates around, pausing each time, until she came back to the same place again.

'Well, if he likes it, well and good, if not he must just tell me!' the girl muttered resignedly, but dissatisfied. She glanced towards

the big window opening on to the yard, where Colonel Ștefănescu was talking endlessly to the peasants.

The old ex-army lease-holder looked livelier and bolder. The day before yesterday, in a moment of inspiration, he had suddenly remembered Major Tănăsescu, who had been promoted simultaneously with him and had been in the same regiment for years, when both were captains, in Severin. His wife, God rest her soul, had then been very friendly with Madame Tănăsescu. As the major and his wife had recently moved to Pitești, and had no children, he could easily take in the three young ladies until all danger was past. The colonel had not even written to ask about it, but had set off yesterday morning with the girls and a respectable load of provisions, and had come back alone and happy, having got rid of his biggest worry. He could now talk to the peasants at his leisure and even joke with them and tease them: 'You're nothing less than boyars now! Work doesn't suit you any more! Of course, it's easier to sit with a pipe in your mouth, curse the boyars and plot rebellion, than till the soil! What do you say, Ștefan?'

'Well, Mr Colonel,' Ștefan answered with a smile. 'We thought we'd try it out!'

'We saw how things were, and they were bad. Now we shall try another way, and see!' a deep voice interjected.

'Well, I'm afraid you'll see the devil, my lads!' the colonel said.

After a couple of moments spent passing from one topic to the other, the smiling Ștefan enquired: 'And the young ladies - have you taken them into town, Mr Colonel?'

'You'd have liked me to have them here, so that you could take advantage of their innocence, wouldn't you?' answered the colonel in a joking tone. 'Don't I know what scoundrels you are!'

'Why, Mr Colonel, how could we?'

'You are, Ștefan! Didn't I sweat with your sort in the army? I know you inside out! But what can you do with me? Kill me? D'you think I'm afraid to die? I, an officer? Or rob me? You can if you want to! Everything I have is sunk in this place and I've divided with you. It's no matter, lads, God is above and sees all! I haven't beaten you, I haven't cheated you, I haven't been unfair with you; I've helped you, defended you and given you good advice and now you come to beat me up! Isn't that right?'

The colonel looked at every peasant in turn, as if expecting a word of protest or agreement. The men kept silent. At last Ștefan, who was the most open of them all, murmured: 'Well!'

His voice faded away into the air like a soap bubble.

'What's up, Petrică, my love? Why are you so restless,

why don't you stay at home, like decent people?' Smaranda complained.

'Well, I'm here, aren't I, mother!' said Petre harshly.

'Yes, you are, but you're fidgeting all the time, and oh Lord, I'm afraid something will happen to you if you keep meddling in everything instead of looking after our own poverty!'

'I'm not meddling, mother, I've got no reason to!' the young man muttered. 'But if people call me, I have to go, it would be a disgrace if I didn't!'

'It wouldn't be a disgrace at all, my love! I'm a widow, and the other children are small – you're my only hope and support. They kept you away long enough in the army, and I had to struggle alone.'

'People say they're going to call us up again, because . . .'

'The Lord bless us, preserve us and deliver us from that!' exclaimed the woman, crossing herself in horror.

'But no orders have come to these parts yet; the mayor would have told us,' Petre said. 'Come what may, mother, don't worry for nothing!'

And he added thickly, after a while, as if touching the subject which stuck deepest to his heart: 'If only that lady wouldn't hang around here. Somehow she brings all the evil with her. If she'd only go away, instead of poisoning us with her company!'

Smaranda became furious all of a sudden: 'Blast the lady to hell – the devil take that bloody woman!'

Mayor Pravilă entered the inn, complacently rubbing his hands.

'What, alone, Cristache? That's how I like to see the place! Let me have a quick one – I'm in a hurry! I've so many things on my hands, I don't know where I am.'

'Is the prefect coming?' enquired Busuioc as he served the drink.

'The Lord bring him as soon as possible, to calm the people!' the mayor said, as the brandy went down in one gulp.

'They seem to be quieter, they stay at home,' the innkeeper muttered regretfully. 'The only company I've had, until I kicked him out just now, has been Spiridon.'

'Well, you know, this silence isn't a good sign, you listen to me!' Pravilă said darkly. 'When the dog's going to bite, he stops barking!'

'Have you seen or heard anything?'

'What should I see or hear – as if people would say anything when they're up to something! Does anybody know anything? One moves, and the others follow like sheep, Cristache!'

'These are evil times, Mr Mayor!'

'That's how things are! If only they don't get worse!'

Then he remembered he was in a hurry, and, going to the door, shouted in a changed, authoritative voice: 'Now mind, Cristea, your place must be in order. One never knows whether the prefect will want to come and inspect it! Best be prepared!'

'Let him come! But I don't think it's very likely anyone will bother himself with inspecting inns just now! There are much bigger chestnuts in the fire!'

3

On Wednesday morning Titu Herdelea arrived at *Drapelul* very early, in order to tell Roşu the news of the reservists' revolt and the killing of some officers, especially as *Dimineaţa* had printed nothing about it.

'Yes, I know!' the secretary replied in a superior voice. 'And I know a few even more extraordinary things. *Dimineaţa* did make an attempt at publishing it, but they were told that if they did, the whole edition would be confiscated, so they gave up. Of course, I know about it, my boy, but could you think I didn't?'

He rose from behind his newspaper-littered desk, taking Titu by the hand like a school-boy, and led him to a map of Rumania which was pinned to the wall.

'See this horseshoe, my boy?' he went on like a tutor, running his index finger along the convolutions of the frontier. 'You see it? Remember what I said about ten days ago when we discussed the peasant disturbances? Well, was I right, eh? See, they started up here in the corner, towards Bucovina, with the Jews, and it went on and on, with "Down with the Jews" and "Down with the side-whiskers". Do you remember that you, too, thought that the whole matter only concerned a few Jewish side-whiskers? And now, look, it has come down to Teleorman there! See? And the flames are gradually spreading; I assure you that in three or four days they will have reached Severin, that is, the length of the whole horse-shoe. Now the gentlemen are rather alarmed about "Down with the Jews", now they feel it on their own skins, for the peasant isn't discriminating between Jew or Christian, now that he's risen to get justice. And just where there are no Jews, the disturbances are most serious. In Moldavia, it seems, there was no murder and no bloodshed, but in these parts numbers of landlords and lease-holders have been slaughtered by the rebellious peasants.'

He seated himself at his desk again. Only his head, the spectacles shining like monstrous eyes, could be seen above the pile of newspapers. Titu had listened in horror, especially when Roşu had mentioned Teleorman. That meant that Amara, too, was in

danger, and so was Nadina, about whom Gogu Ionescu had spoken last night.

'Please tell me, Mr Roşu, is there any serious news from Argeş?' he asked suddenly.

'Not yet,' the secretary answered, 'but it will be difficult for Argeş to escape the deluge if it is already flooding neighbouring Teleorman. Why d'you ask? Because of your friend? Well, he's in very serious danger, although one never knows. Much depends on the caprices of fate. In any case, as you are personally interested in this matter, I will tell you a sure and immediate source of information – go to Director Modreanu, at the Ministry of the Interior, and tell him I sent you on behalf of the newspaper. All news, that is, all official news, goes there now. He has been assigned a special job there. He's a decent refined sort of fellow, but he likes to show off. I tell you all this so that you'll know how to tackle him.'

Titu felt touched and thanked him. He was especially glad to be able to assist Grigore Iuga, who had so warmly greeted him on their first meeting and had been so friendly ever since, and also Gogu Ionescu, who, poor fellow, was so worried about Nadina.

The editor's door opened suddenly; and Deliceanu's head appeared in the gap.

'Has anything else come in, Roşu?'

'Nothing; perhaps later, towards noon. I'll ring up and let you know!' the secretary replied without lifting his nose from his heap of papers.

When the door had closed, Titu asked in amazement: 'He's come already?'

'Oho, my boy, even before me!' said Roşu ironically. 'We are tottering!'

'The government?' Herdlea asked.

'The government as well; the whole crowd.' Roşu answered in his usual morose manner. 'Soon we're all going to the dogs.'

'At least we'll be able to work more freely if we are in opposition!' said the young man, smiling naively.

'Don't rejoice too much about being in opposition, my friend, it would be very dangerous for us!' the secretary muttered, beginning to wipe his spectacles nervously. Without them, his face appeared helpless and even moodier. 'Have you noticed what an army of sub-editors, super-sub-editors and reporters we have today, most of them place-seekers? Well, tomorrow I may suddenly find myself alone with these scissors – that is, if I'm not pushed out as well! This is what it means to work on a party newspaper, my young friend! As long as the party is in power, he profits who can, and then . . . But you needn't worry,' he added, having replaced his spectacles, and seeing that Titu had turned pale, 'you still happen

to be safe for a few months. That will give you enough time to arrange your affairs.'

People now began to enter the editorial office. Every newcomer brought fresh news, each item worse than its predecessor: that the revolt had spread to such and such county; that the peasants in such and such a region had killed so many lease-holders and big landowners; that the army had clashed with insurgent peasants in such and such a village, and there were hundreds of dead and wounded on both sides; that in other parts the villagers had driven off infantry detachments with stones; that many counties were completely isolated, because the telegraph wires were all cut; that a land-owning lady had been caught by the rebellious peasants, stripped naked and carried around through several villages; that the War Minister was an idiot, because he sent troops to restore order to the very region from which they had been recruited, so that they were supposed to shoot at their own parents and brothers – a corporal had shot his own father among the rebellious peasants, and, having asked his captain for permission to bury him, was awarded a medal and mentioned in the Order of the Day; that National Guards had been set up in certain towns in defence against gangster attacks by the crazed peasants, and that last night, near the border of Ilfov county, a cavalry patrol had only managed with difficulty to disperse a crowd of several thousand peasants who were on their way to Bucharest.

At about eleven Antimiu, the fat reporter with the greasy fur coat and imitation moleskin *căciulă*, entered, serious as a minister-without-portfolio, and perspiring more than ever, for it was a sunny day outside. Shaking hands in a bored manner with some of them, and murmuring: '*Bonjour, mon cher*,' he sank into a chair near Roșu. His portentous entry, as of one who brings information from exalted bodies, quietened the eagerly wagging tongues. Observing that he remained silent in order to attract attention to himself, Roșu enquired sarcastically, but nevertheless with curiosity: 'Have you brought anything, Antimiu?'

'Something very important, Uncle Roșu!' exclaimed the reporter with pathos. 'Unfortunately it's not for us, although it does concern us very closely, because our fate hangs on it.'

'Well, come on, out with it, spare us this introduction!' interrupted the secretary, exasperated.

'The government has fallen!' announced the reporter, infusing a touch of grief into his voice. 'By tomorrow evening at the latest we shall have a new one!'

He went on to tell those who wanted the details that the Prime Minister had just been received by the king, and had told him that the agrarian disturbances had taken such serious proportions that

urgent and energetic punitive expeditions had become necessary. He had given examples showing that the army could no longer be entirely relied upon for such a tragic task, and had asked the king to appeal for the assistance of Austrian troops, for this was the only solution; otherwise the whole country was threatened with total destruction. The king, however, had flatly refused to seek foreign intervention to quell purely domestic disorders, and had asked the Prime Minister to provide a solution more suitable to the circumstances and prestige of the country. As he had no such solution, and because of the pressure of the opposition, which even in the present situation was not willing to offer support, the Prime Minister had handed in the resignation of his Cabinet. This had been accepted in principle, but would not be announced before a successor had been found, to avoid increasing the chaos. As the new government might have to urgently pass new laws, its co-operation with the existing parliament must be ensured; a situation which would give the appearance of a National Front dealing with the serious situation and making it easier to take stern measures. The party's leader and head of the government must therefore consult his associates and report once more to the King. But these were only formalities, which would be carried out quickly.

'So it's back to opposition!' Roşu commented, with a sour smile. 'Wait a minute, let's see if Deliceanu knows about this.'

He entered the editor's office, and after a few seconds Deliceanu appeared in the doorway, his face pink, and shouted: 'What's this you're talking about, Antimiu? Come here!'

'We're out, sir!' said the reporter with the same pathos and waddled into the editor's office.

Titu Herdelea slipped out; Roşu's remark had struck him to the heart. He, who had thought that by working conscientiously he would ensure himself a decent living, was now once again blown about like a leaf in the wind. This matter must be cleared up with Roşu, so that he should not find himself flung out into the street.

But he did not want to depress himself with dismal premonitions for the time being. Trouble was bad enough when it arrived, why torture oneself in anticipation? As it was almost lunch-time, he went to look for Modreanu at the Ministry of the Interior. There, he had to wait along with other journalists who had come for news. Modreanu was with the Minister, probably showing him the telegrams and reports which had arrived during the night and this morning. Finally he arrived; affable, smiling and elegant, oozing sweetness, like a lady who is late for her appointment.

'My dear gentlemen, you must forgive me . . . the Minister! . . . difficult times, gentlemen. Just allow me one moment to finish with this folder, and then I'm at your disposal!'

He pressed the bell, and an ancient, miserable looking clerk entered, took the folder, locked it in the safe, and gave him the key. Modreanu came forward into the group of journalists, and told them items of news with which they were already familiar. But as a consolation he informed them that in the afternoon at five he would tell them whatever news had arrived in the meantime, even before communicating it to the Minister.

The journalists withdrew amid the usual noise. Titu Herdelea stayed behind alone, introduced himself, and asked especially about any information from Argeş, saying that he enquired on behalf of Grigore Iuga.

'Oh, Mr Iuga!' Modreanu exclaimed, adjusting his tie. 'I believe I had the pleasure of meeting him once on the train. Of course, Mr Herdelea, with pleasure. Do come whenever you like, and I'll be at your disposal. But you can assure your friend that up to now everything is quiet in Argeş!'

Titu Herdelea descended the stairs feeling as satisfied as if he had heard the most sensational news and murmuring to himself: 'I must do whatever I can to show my gratitude; one never knows what tomorrow will bring.'

4

The courtyard and road in front of the village hall were filled with peasants, who had been waiting for something like an hour now, but still the prefect had not come. Mayor Praviľă, in a fever of zeal, had rushed everybody there as if there was a fire.

'Never mind, lads!' he said now to one and then to the other, making friendly excuses. 'We are waiting for Mr Prefect, not he for us, that's how it should be!'

The peasants stayed on with their traditional patience; time had no price, except during the season of work on the land. And as they waited, tongues wagged to exhaustion. Some said that the prefect was coming to divide the land, because that was what had happened in another county, and then the people there had settled down and started to work. At the same time, other quietly discussed what the peasants had done in Teleorman; how they had risen, from the youngest to the eldest, and driven out the boyars and become the masters of everything.

'Well, they're a different sort of people, not like us!' muttered a miserable voice. 'People have land there, they're not all poverty-stricken like us here!'

'Yes, but luck is with the bold, not the impotent, with their hearts in their pants!'

'Anybody would think we had water instead of blood!'

'Now, now, lads!'

Sergeant Boiangiu had taken the precaution of posting a policeman at the crossroads in front of Busuioc's inn, with instructions to come at the double when the boyars approached so as to be able to announce their arrival in time, and was now standing in the road, his eyes turned in the direction from which he expected them to come. He chatted with the peasants around him and cracked a few jokes, which naturally were received with guffaws of laughter, but still preserved his proper dignity. One peasant actually permitted himself to ask seriously: 'I wonder, Mr Boiangiu, whether they'll give us any land? You must know. Oh God, how wonderful it would be if they did, Mr Boiangiu!'

'D'you think I couldn't do with a picce myself, fellow?' Boiangiu answered. 'Ha - do you think I've got estates, like boyar Miron? My sword, my rifle and my small wage - that's my estate!'

'And what you pick up on the side, Mr Boiangiu!' added one of the wags.

The peasants sniggered, and the sergeant grew angry.

'You see what swine you are? Which of you was it - let me see, so that I shall know him! That's how you all are, shameless and impudent, and then you complain when you get it in the neck, like you deserve! Come on out, you with the lip!'

'Oh, let him be, Mr Boiangiu, he was just joking like a fool!'

'Well, that's why I want him, I want to show him a joke.'

At that moment the policeman arrived and announced breathlessly that the gentlemen had just turned into Miron Iuga's manor. This news caused a stir among the peasants. The mayor, who had come up to find out what the courier had said, felt himself called upon to explain that the prefect could not possibly have passed by the old boyar's place without dropping in on him, for they were old friends. This, however, far from lessening the commotion, increased the general agitation. What were the prefect and Boyar Miron cooking up now?

A quarter of an hour later the prefect's big, heavy chaise appeared, and came to rest in the middle of the crowd. Miron Iuga sat next to Boerescu, and opposite them, on the small seat, was Tiberiu Corbulcanu, the police inspector: a man with a smart little moustache on his dark, rather broad face.

'Well then, how are things with you?' called Boerescu, descending mincingly from the carriage.

'At your service, Mr Prefect!' Ion Pravilă humbly responded, hastening to assist the prefect. Boiangiu, meanwhile, stood stiffly to attention, his right hand raised in salute.

'You're the mayor, are you?' the prefect enquired. 'Ah yes, I know you! Is everything quiet here? All in order?'

'Everything in order, Mr Prefect!' the mayor declared in sugary tones, emphasizing his conviction with an artificial smile.

'That's how I like to see things, lads, well done!' the prefect cried, glancing over the peasants, who stood calmly looking at him and his carriage but with their *cdciulds* on their heads. 'You must behave decently and peacefully, like good Rumanians!'

Miron Iuga also got down from the chaise; the prefect took his arm, and both entered the yard of the village hall. The inspector stayed behind a few moments to hear the sergeant's report, nodding as he did so. Then all paused in front of the office. The peasants crowded around, leaving a small circle free in front of the prefect, who examined their appearances and especially their expressions. Although he was extremely tired, he endeavoured to smile and appear friendly and full of good will. This was the second day of his tour of investigation, observation and morale-raising. But the attitude of the peasants troubled him more than his own fatigue; it almost offended him that, wherever he went there was too little respect and even a provocative attitude. He was used to being received on these inspections with a burst of cheerful exclamations of 'Long life, sir!' The complaints and requests only came later. But now the villagers were meeting him in silence, with scowls and suspicious looks; if he had not been striving to avoid in his country the disturbances which raged elsewhere, he would not have tolerated such indiscipline. He had made a mental resolve, however, to teach them a lesson later, when order had been restored. Boerescu had a great opinion of himself as a prefect, and often remarked proudly that the county which came first in Rumanian in alphabetical order possessed the first prefect in qualitative order. The fact that the neighbouring counties had been engulfed in the wave of revolt which was sweeping the country, while in his own county nothing had so far been reported, he considered as a proof of the excellent administrative methods he applied. He had undertaken the present tour of inspection quite convinced that as soon as the peasants saw him and heard him they would be so impressed by his authority that even if they had previously harboured evil ideas they would continue to behave in a decent, orderly manner. On leaving Pitesti he had told Inspector Corbuleanu, who had considered it imprudent to take such a trip through the villages in these troubled times, that he stood or fell by his motto (which he had read somewhere recently and adopted): 'An iron hand in a velvet glove'. In particular he wanted to throw into bold perspective his qualities as a fine county administrator, for the Minister had hesitated over his appointment and shown some preference for a

lawyer who had held the position under the last government. But then Boerescu had taken action – that is, he had pulled strings through some influential friends in Bucharest, crushing the Minister's resistance.

'Well, once again, lads, I hope I find you well!' he now repeated in a suitably powerful voice for a public gathering.

He paused for a moment, waiting for the customary response. But the people remained silent, except for those in the street, who tried to squeeze into the yard, muttering and sniggering as they did so. The prefect controlled his temper. Just as he was about to recommence, the mayor suddenly yelled: 'Keep quiet, lads, quiet. Let's listen to Mr Prefect!'

Boerescu then made a patriotic speech. His face suffused, his voice swelled, he gesticulated, and from his mouth, from which glinted several gold teeth, emerged big words suitable to the occasion, which floated up and burst futilely like empty bubbles at a fair over the heads of the wide-eyed audience, who did not understand anything. Among the many political qualities with which the prefect credited himself was that of being an unsurpassed popular orator. He was confident that his fiery words penetrated straight to the peasants' hearts, spell-binding them into compliance. He juggled with sentences and irresistible phrases such as: 'The sandal of the peasant is the mainstay of the country', 'your sacred labour', 'the wise and industrious Rumanian peasant', 'the paternal care of the king and the government', 'have confidence in your country's leaders', 'love for the motherland', 'our country's interests demand peace and quiet, lads', 'Rumanians will not perish', and so on. The peasants listened, immovable, with glazed eyes. The hundreds of faces, wearing the same expression, seemed to belong to one head, sharing one set of thoughts and feelings, one man, copied innumerable, like the mass-production of some great factory. This immobility and stubborn silence had irritated and slightly intimidated the prefect when he had encountered it in the first village, with the result that he barely had the strength to continue wasting his eloquence.

Miron Iuga did not listen. He only had contempt for this method of putting the peasants off by handing them empty words. They did not need speeches, they needed advice and instruction. He had drawn Boerescu's attention to the fact that time should not be wasted in mere word-spinning, but should be used for concise, sincere discussion with the aim of finding out what the peasants wanted and claimed, and to see whether they could or could not be met. And any promises made should not be empty ones, but should immediately be carried out. But the prefect would not on any account agree to giving up his intention to speak, everywhere he

had spoken he said, he had been heard with almost reverent attention; an intelligent speech like his own was the best beginning in cooling the people down and discovering the true state of affairs. Now, seeing the effect of the speech, to which only the inspector, the sergeant and the mayor listened with the artificial enthusiasm of such underlings, old Miron felt ashamed and almost humiliated in front of the peasants.

After half-an-hour, Prefect Boerescu abandoned his peroration and suddenly and urgently addressed the peasants directly: 'So, my boys! Now you must prove to me right away that you are good Rumanians and worthy citizens! As your father, and the father of our beloved county, I ask you for this proof! If you want to show that you are decent, honest and industrious as I know you to be, then pay no heed to the words of the malefactors, do not lend your ears to evil rumours, rather return speedily to your ploughs, to your noble toil, which is the bulwark of our country. The Lord has granted us fine weather, the soil ~~only~~ awaits your honest sweat to yield a richer harvest, for your benefit and the benefit of our blest country! You hear me, my children? You understand me? Now will you do as I tell you, or won't you?'

His final words called forth a hesitant response. Voices were heard among the crowd: 'We can't, master! We haven't got any land! What should we work on?'

Considering these voices as the outcome of his pacifying speech, the prefect cast a significant glance at Miron Iuga, and then cried: 'Why can't you, my children? Now come, out with it, so that we know it too!'

Several voices answered, in firmer tones: 'We haven't got any land! We need land! We shan't work without land any more!'

Boerescu now assumed the expression of an indulgent teacher admonishing a number of ignorant pupils: 'For heavens' sake, how can you say such a thing to me? You haven't got land? Didn't Mr Iuga want to give you land? And the other boyars? Haven't they always provided land, from their forefathers onwards? It is with you, not with strangers, that they work their estates!'

Toader Strimbu, standing on tiptoe, shouted angrily: 'We can't go on this way! We sweat for nothing, and poverty is killing us!'

'So you want different contracts?' asked Boerescu frankly. 'Then wait, lads, because . . .'

'We've had enough of contracts! We want the land for ourselves, because we work it!' voices interrupted him noisily.

Miron Iuga, dissatisfied at the turn events had taken, then indicated that he, too, wished to speak. The peasants fell silent. For them the old boyar was the real, respected master, whose word must always be listened to respectfully.

'Now what's all this shouting for?' old Iuga asked, sweeping the whole crowd with his glance. 'Should I give you my land, as a reward for the fact that I, my father and my grandfather have taken you, your parents and your grandparents on to our estates, and given you work, so that you could make a living. We have shared both the good and the bad with you; now you want to take away from us all the land we have left and drive us out of our houses like strangers! Is that what you call justice? And you, Toader, as you have such a big mouth, do you share your property with others? Come on now, tell us plainly, so that we can hear you!'

Those standing around Toader Strimbu, turned their heads towards him, laughing, but he gave a firm answer: 'Yes, if only I had some, master, I would share it, but I haven't!'

'Of course you have!' Miron persisted. 'Haven't you got a house and doesn't the piece of land it's built on belong to you?'

'The house is falling down round our ears, master,' Toader answered in the same tone.

'So because it's falling down you don't divide it!' the old boyar continued. 'While I, and others, have taken care so that ours doesn't tumble down, you expect us to divide it with you? That's what you mean, I suppose, eh? That's not the right way to look at things, my men! Those who taught you this way of thinking have done a great deal of harm, and now you've lost your senses and run after the moon instead of minding your own business like decent people. You should know that these people who encourage you to persist in this way are just making fools of you. I have never lied to you or misled you with fine promises; what I like is justice and decency. When you were not satisfied with the old contracts we could have talked, and if I had seen that you had justice on your side, we could have changed them. But not by threats; by decent, human talk. Threats don't frighten me, and I don't bend to them wherever they might come from. Those who are in the right don't have to threaten, because justice comes to the top of its own accord. You can jump the brook by bad means sometimes, but if you try to leap the river, you will drown, while by fair means you can cross even the seas. This is what you should remember, my people. I say this to you because I am old, I've had a lot of experience and come up against a good many things. Now use your brains and calm down, that is the only way you can live!'

From the hesitant silence which followed, there emerged the whining, humble voice of Ignat Cercel, who was near the front, sounding like a sigh from the whole crowd: 'Better to die than live like this!'

This encouraged the others to speak up here and there: 'You'd better kill us off, and get rid of us!'

'Whether we die of hunger or something else, it's death just the same!'

'If we've got to work ourselves until we drop, then at least you should give us enough to keep body and soul together!'

'It's not right that some should stuff until they burst, while the guts of others rattle with hunger!'

The prefect judged that the atmosphere was developing along favourable lines. When angry people began to talk, it was always a sign that they were beginning to come to their senses. He began to speak again, more old womanish than ever announcing that he had come to make peace between them, for even the worst peace was better than the most heroic battle. In addition, he had brought Mr Iuga into their midst, in order that they might come to a fine peace.

'Well, Mr Prefect, we'll come to terms with the boyar,' said Lupu Chirițoiu, coming to the front. Being the eldest, he felt it incumbent upon him to explain fully. 'Since others are making an issue out of all this, we people want to take a bit of land as the others have where there've been fires already, because we haven't got any at all. What our boyar says is fair and just. It isn't decent to try to get hold of land belonging to somebody else who has worked and bothered with it, like us, from our forefathers down, Mr Prefect. I don't think any of these honest people want to take boyar Miron's property; after all, we all live together and help each other. But there are lots of estates the boyars have abandoned and given to others who only care about squeezing out money, and make a mockery of our labour. The peasants aren't wicked, they're quiet, but you must give them land, otherwise they can't go on living! There - I've told you what the village wants. If we all speak together, there's no chance of reaching an understanding!'

Loud exclamations of agreement burst out from all sections of the crowd. Everybody took up the one word - 'land', till the crowd became a choir of innumerable voices constantly repeating; 'Land! . . . land! . . . land!'

Prefect Boerescu was at a loss, and commenced another dissertation: he understood their love and desire for land - wasn't he a landowner himself, loving the furrows ploughed by his ancestors? But the people could not have what they wanted immediately, just like that. The country had its laws and these must be respected. The peasants must be patient and remain quiet, because as soon as he arrived in Pitești he would report to the government, which was wise, and had the grievances of the peasants at heart. The government would make the necessary decrees so that the land would be given to those who had been decent and law-abiding. This false promise had been a momentary inspiration; the prefect regretted

that he had not thought of making it in the other villages as well. The need to maintain order and security in the country was not only an excuse for resorting to such pious methods of persuasion, but actually a duty. When order had been restored, nobody would remember words so lightly spoken, and at the very least he would be praised for quickmindedness in speaking to the peasants in words suitable to such great children.

The peasants, however, continually interrupted his promises with jokes and laughter. A shrill voice called out that they had had their fill of words, another added that the boyars fed them with lies, while a third said that every time a boyar opened his mouth, a lie came out. Miron Iuga was choking with rage under this rain of impertinence. The prefect himself was confused, coloured up and did not know what else to say. The mayor, observing that the jokes were becoming anything but funny, quickly shouted: 'Shut up there, lads, that'll do!'

Luca Talabă, who was one of those in front, retorted: 'Better they should speak, then the gentlemen'll know what's bothering them!'

Nevertheless, the peasants fell silent once more, and Boerescu, feeling he had not been sufficiently understood, tried once again to dangle the carrot of his promises.

Hardly had he opened his mouth, however, before Ștefan Mogoș cut in: 'We've been made fools of enough, worse than animals!'

Nicolae Dragoș added morosely: 'Haven't you already made a scapegoat of my brother, by sending him to prison?'

Old Dragoș also added, though in a quieter, more respectful tone: 'A great injustice, Mr Prefect! And the village left without a teacher, too!'

As many people took up and shouted the word 'scapegoat', the prefect, at a loss, leaned over to the mayor for information, and, having obtained it, said hurriedly: 'Stop, stop! Let us understand each other, my children. The case of Dragoș, the teacher, is not in my hands and doesn't depend on me. He is under investigation, and so . . .'

As the noise persisted, however, Boerescu continued in a louder voice: 'All the same, I'll ask the prosecutor if he can be freed at once, and then the investigation can proceed while he is at liberty. You hear me? Are you satisfied, lads?'

Nicolae Dragoș muttered something, but as everybody was speaking at once, and shouting across each other, his voice was drowned. Only his strong white teeth could be seen, like snarling fangs. Among the increasing hubbub, a general cry emerged urging Pavel Tunsu to go to the prefect and ask for compensation for the ill treatment and pain his child had suffered. Pavel struggled to make way through the crowd, egged on by many insistent voices:

'Go on, Pavel! What, man, are you afraid? Let him get past, fellows, he's got a complaint!'

At last, when he was in front of the boyars, Pavel Tunsu, with a long face, recounted in a whining voice how his child had been knocked about, and asked for compensation for the outrage. These diversions pleased the prefect, who felt that if he offered to satisfy the peasants on these small matters, they would forget the bigger madness. He put a number of questions to Pavel, sympathized with him, and ordered the mayor to make an immediate official investigation, register the man's complaint and his just request, so that ultimately he, the prefect, would be able to compel the individuals in the automobile to make appropriate compensation, and at the same time to punish them according to law. This declaration, made in grave, deliberate tones, satisfied the crowd, who expressed this in a general relaxation and stilling of voices.

Upon seeing Pavel Tunsu go up to make his complaint, Petre reddened in anger, and muttered under his breath. From the beginning he had made his way to the front, along with the leading villagers and now stood next to Sergeant Boiangiu. He had listened quietly and respectfully to all the phrases uttered by the prefect, and even more reverently to the words of old Iuga, going so far as to frown reproachfully a couple of times at those who shouted more loudly than was seemly. As soon as he heard about the lady and the car, however, his expression changed, and a wave of fury passed through him like a burning flame. He struggled so much to master himself that the effort was painful, but when the prefect mentioned the people in the automobile, he burst out hoarsely despite himself, as if to avoid any injustice, his eyes flaming:

'It's all the lady's fault, Mr Prefect, she just came here to twist the knife in the wound!'

This interruption, and especially his heated expression, was considered so insolent by all that it provoked general indignation. Miron Iuga cast him a contemptuous look, the police inspector bit back a curse, and Boerescu remarked in irritation: 'What's the matter with you, fellow, eh?'

The question hit Petre like a smack in the face. This same prefect who had listened to the shouts and gibes of the others, now abused him alone, as if he were the lowest in the village, he who . . . He answered, scowling, his words sticking in his throat: 'Why did the lady come here? Why does she make fools of us? We don't need her, let her go back where she came from, back to her boyars, and leave us in peace, not torture and cripple our children. We haven't done her any harm, and she needn't think that she'll sell the estate, because . . .'

Only a section of the crowd responded, the rest merely turned

their heads, looking at him in friendly amazement. Sergeant Boiangiu, thinking that Petre had forgotten himself and spoken in anger without realizing what he said, and might regret it later, suddenly put up his hand and covered the young man's mouth, as he would that of an ignorant child. The sergeant's gesture maddened Petre, who saw it as yet another indignity in front of the villagers. He violently thrust the sergeant's hand away, pulling himself back against those who stood behind, and raging: 'Take your hands off me! Why d'you lay your hands on me? Am I your slave? You make me look a fool! Why did you put your hands on me?'

A shudder ran through the crowd, as if his shouts had revived their sufferings. But before anyone could take in what he said, or follow the road opened for them by Smaranda's son, Ion Pravilă, the mayor, quickly addressed him in a friendly but authoritative voice, exactly suited to the circumstances: 'Shut up, lad, nobody's laid hands on you, or made a fool of you. Shut up, now better go and see to your own business and not disturb this meeting!'

Serafim Mogoş and Nicolae Dragoş, who stood nearest to Petre, together with several others who were nearer the road, muttered with one voice: 'He shouldn't have laid hands on him. Why did he do it?'

The mayor, taking advantage of their interjection, went on with the same firmness: 'Now come on, Serafim, and you, Nicu. Take him along with you to cool down. Come along now, off with you!'

As if stupefied by the mayor's insistence, Petre elbowed his way through the crush, followed by Serafim and Nicolae, and then by others. He continued to shout the same words over and over again, as if they had stuck to his tongue and he could not say anything else:

'Why did he lay his hands on me? I'm nobody's fool! Why did he lay hands . . .'

As Petre and the others made their way to the road, Ion Pravilă commented loudly to the prefect, so that all should hear, that he thought the lad must have something wrong with him, God only knows what weird ideas had entered his head; otherwise he was a decent and hardworking young fellow, the best boy in the village. But poverty warped the minds of many people, driving them to agitation when they had no intention of behaving like that. Inspector Corbuleanu had turned pale, biting his lips in nervous hesitation, feeling that the fellow's shouts would set off a revolt – if indeed it had not been the signal decided beforehand by the conspiring peasants.

When the incident was over the prefect felt that he had done his duty, and could now go on to pacify other villages before night fell. To round off his visit with the appropriate gravity, he felt it necessary

to give another short oration concerning 'Our beloved motherland', 'our precious little country', 'the respected Sovereign', 'our duty as citizens' and 'the government's solicitude for you', ending with jovial satisfaction: 'And now, my children, farewell! I have every confidence in you, as you must have in me! So! Order, peace and labour! You see! Come along, inspector! Good luck and good health!'

The peasants herded out of the Council yard. Boerescu wanted to see Miron Iuga home, but the old man refused, and they embraced each other in parting. The prefect climbed into the chaise alongside the inspector, and they turned off to the left, towards Lespezi, while Miron Iuga walked off to the right alone.

'Well, how did you like the way I settled things here, Inspector?' the prefect asked, when they had gone some way down the road.

'You have a great deal of courage and experience!' Inspector Corbuleanu answered in an admiring tone, but to himself he thought that this kind of settling things in fact only encouraged disorder among the peasants.

Miron Iuga walked down the middle of the road, examining the cottages and yards in passing, as if he had not seen them for a long time, and regretting that he had agreed to go with that idiot, Boerescu, who thought that by wagging his tongue he could influence these people, whose spirits had been disturbed by the wind of demagoguery from the towns.

A few paces behind him came the mayor and the sergeant, surrounded by the peasants, all talking to each other quietly, as if wishing to avoid irritating their boyar, who, walking in front of the crowd, seemed like a shepherd leading his flock.

At Busuioc's inn, all was noise and gaiety. The innkeeper, standing on the threshold, bowed respectfully to Miron Iuga. After the old boyar had passed, the hubbub, which had momentarily died down mounted again. The voice of Petre could clearly be heard: 'Why should he lay hands on me?'

5

However hard lawyer Stavrat might try to forget his terror and be amiable and chivalrous he did not succeed. He felt it would betray insensitivity and cynicism if, in face of all the dangers crowding in the air, he allowed himself to think of amorous adventures. In fact, the whole affair now seemed to him ridiculous rather than as a grand passion. He suddenly realized that he was an old man, and it was ludicrous for him to hang around a sophisticated young lady like Nadina, who, if she were seeking a lover, could not

possibly see anything in him. She was merely amusing herself at his expense when she tolerated his sighs.

Nadina was chattering gaily, moving to and fro making arrangements for the meal, remarking to him: 'I thought you would be pleasant company, laughing and flirting with me, or at least telling me some jokes – in other words, that we would spend a couple of pleasant days here. And now it seems that you are sulky and frightened, quite capable of spoiling my mood!'

Stavrat's only response was a sour smile, intended to express that it was merely the fact that she did not appreciate the true situation that enabled her to look so lightly upon things and consider enjoying herself.

In the afternoon, however, he put on a funereal expression, and asked her to listen to him attentively and seriously for a moment. Then, rallying all his powers of persuasion, he explained eloquently and in detail that to stay there in the middle of rebellious peasants, who might revolt at any moment, plundering and murdering, was madness. If she had desired an unusual adventure, she had had this already, for she had passed through dozens of villages in the car at a time when not even the trains were safe. She had even spent a night unguarded in a manor, and had exposed herself to a surprise attack by the peasants with no possibility of defence. The aim, or perhaps it had only been pretext, of the trip had fallen through, as Platamону, a prospective purchaser himself, had told her. The conclusion: they must leave the place at once, if not for Bucharest – for that was too far and too risky – at least for Pitești, from whence they might continue their journey by train, with the car to follow when possible. That was the only intelligent way out of this tragic muddle.

First of all Nadina pretended to listen to him with malicious gravity. But little by little the terror which trembled in his most commonplace words, and was outlined more and more clearly on his face, entered her heart as well. She began to see that Stavrat, in fact, was right, and that danger stood on the doorstep, ready to burst in upon them. Through the wide-open window of the lounge could be seen the vast, bare courtyard of the manor. There was no sound; the silence was oppressive. The bright glare of the unseen sun emphasized the painful quiet, in which Stavrat's terror-stricken words, scattered like frightened birds. Nadina felt that it would be humiliating to show her anxiety, and wanted to put a brave face on it, but because of that silence outside she did not dare to open her mouth. Only when the sound of Rudolf busily whistling as he worked on the motor came like a sudden salvation, did she regain her confidence and say: 'Of course, but don't exaggerate too much, Mr Stavrat! You know the lease-holder assured us that the peasants were quiet here, and . . .'

'Your lease-holder is an ass, my lady, if I may say so!' exclaimed the lawyer. 'In fact, people who live in constant danger grow to ignore it. This is the only explanation of old Iuga's behaviour. He is a man of sense and sobriety, but he showed no alarm yesterday. Maybe he has other reasons, as well, for his confidence. We, however, who are alien to these unusual circumstances, smell something bad in the air, because our senses are more acute and have not been blunted by daily contact with danger.'

Olimp Stavrat gathered energy as he continued, until Nadina, after a period of wavering between fear and pride, sent Ileana to call Rudolf.

'We're leaving at once!' she said to the chauffeur. 'Get the motor ready. Right away!'

Rudolf answered simply that the car could not be started at once, because there was something wrong with the magneto; he had just taken it apart, and was trying to put it right, but in three or four hours it would be reassembled, and then they could go. Nadina told him to hurry, because it was imperative that they should leave for she would not for the world spend another night there.

'You see, my lady - misfortune!' said Stavrat when they were alone again. 'In three or four hours it will be dark and if it is dangerous to go about in the villages by day, you can imagine what it will be like at night! But we must be patient. Mechanics sometimes exaggerate the time a repair will take, in order to prove their skill and value. Perhaps our friend Rudolf, because he has seen that you are in such a hurry, will finish sooner, and then . . .'

Now it was the lawyer's turn to soothe Nadina, repeatedly visiting the barn where Rudolf was working, to see if he had much more to do.

At about five o'clock they heard sounds in the courtyard. They heralded the arrival of Prefect Boerescu, who had come on his way from Amara to Lespezi, where he had also spoken to the peasants. He had dropped in for a short visit to congratulate Nadina on coming into the midst of the people just at this troubled moment, thus setting an example of courage and virtue to other landowners. Platamonu and his son had been present at the meeting, and had thought it wise to mention to the prefect that Nadina was at the manor. Boerescu, anxious as he was to get to Costesti before nightfall, would otherwise have forgotten her, although Miron had mentioned her, and even asked him to call.

'All right, all right, Mr Prefect, but are you certain that nothing unpleasant will happen here until tomorrow?' asked Nadina, not very enthusiastic about Boerescu's gallantries, which were accompanied by a discreet clicking of the heels on the part of Inspector Corbulcanu.

'But really, my lady, how can you think otherwise!' protested the

prefect proudly. 'Until tomorrow, you say? You wound my pride, my lady. Here you can be sure of peace for eternity!'

He left hurriedly, throwing out a fresh shower of compliments and congratulations. Platamonu remained to take lawyer Stavrat home.

'I want to leave right away!' said Nadina, overcome by greater fear. 'I must go. I don't want to sleep here again! I detest the place!'

'Be easy, my lady!' said the lease-holder in a calm voice, which carried confidence. 'Don't concern yourself! Our people are well-behaved. The prefect, too, told you that . . .'

'Unfortunately your prefect is a puffed-up coxcomb!' exclaimed Stavrat. 'If we went by what he said . . .'

'No, no, you can sleep in peace!' Platamonu repeated with a reassuring, paternal smile. 'You've got nothing to worry about!'

It was arranged that at dawn next day Nadina would pass in her car through Gliganu to pick up Stavrat, who would be waiting for her. She saw them off as far as the porch, and watched them get into the chaise. As the horses began to move, all three turned and bowed in farewell. She responded with a smile, and then waved her small, white hand with a movement like the wing of a bird in flight, following them with her eyes until they disappeared to the right through the gate into the road. Dumitru Ciulici accompanied the chaise a few paces, and remained standing bareheaded in the middle of the yard, unmoving, as if struck by a thought. Nadina stayed where she was, her hand still moving, her unseeing eyes gazing after those who had left, continuously murmuring as if unconsciously: 'Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . .'

She caught sight of Dumitru, whom she had not noticed, and shuddered with fear, as if she had met her worst foe face to face. Her murmur faded, but her fixed smile remained, like a memory of the past.

6

'Who is it? . . . Who's there? . . . Who's knocking?'

'Be so good, Leonte, get up, something's happened, it's . . .'

'Oh, it's you, Mr Mayor!' muttered Bumbu the steward, recognizing the voice. 'I'm coming, just a minute. What's happened, now, for God's sake?' he added to himself, fumbling nervously in the darkness, unable in his sleepiness to comprehend anything the mayor said.

When the steward opened the door, Ion Pravilă, without permitting him to ask a single question sent him back, saying: 'Get dressed, Ruginoasa's burning!'

'Oh Lord! Ruginoasa?' Leonte Bumbu said incredulously, trembling. 'It's impossible!'

'Now come along, don't argue!' the mayor said impatiently. 'Can't you see? It's lighting up the sky like a moon!'

'Oh Lord, Oh Lord!' the steward said, crossing himself as he went back into his cottage.

From outside, the mayor heard Bumbu's wife questioning him, and then breaking into a frightened whimper. The mayor withdrew to where the Ruginoasa watchman, who had brought the news, still stood. The shock had been so great that he had not questioned the man much, but had rushed straight to the manor. The watchman was breathing heavily, and muttered dazedly to himself all the time.

'Has it been burning for long, Nichifor?' the mayor asked, looking over to Ruginoasa, where the sky was as red as the sunrise.

'Well, when I noticed it, the cocks hadn't started to crow for midnight,' the watchman answered in smothered tones. 'I don't know what the time is now; one o'clock, maybe? Some time must have passed while I woke people and came here.'

'Where did the fire start?'

'Well, first the straw and hayricks, and then the outhouses caught, because there was a slight breeze, like there is here.'

The steward now appeared, fully dressed. From the house his wife's weeping voice was heard: 'Be careful, Leonte. Don't be too hard; you might get into trouble with the people; you know how angry they are just now.'

Bumbu set off with the mayor and the watchman without asking any questions. After a few paces, however, he said timidly: 'What do you say, Mr Mayor - wouldn't it be better to wake boyar Miron too?'

'Oh no, let him rest!' murmured Praviłă. 'He'll have enough time to get angry and worry himself tomorrow!'

The trees in the manor grounds closed like a black wall over the sight of Ruginoasa. Only when they had reached the road did Leonte Bumbu see the fire and exclaim, his hand to his mouth: 'Oh God, oh God!'

To the east a huge curtain of flame spread across the sky. Although the village was three kilometres away, the great blaze seemed to be right on the edge of Amara. The sky was clear, as in the earliest hours of dawn, only a few of the larger stars still twinkled in fright and amazement, as if they too were about to die away at any moment. From a heart of scarlet embers, powerful tongues of flame, as if continually fed anew by powerful hands, ceaselessly writhed, twisted and intertwined like biblical serpents, licking and pricking at the firmament, painting great rainbows and then wiping them off with huge columns of smoke, each one floating for a few seconds like a purple rag, madly fluttering like a warning red banner. Huge shadows thrown by the dominating flare of the fire danced across the earth as if everything had begun to quake and crumble.

'Oh my God, what is this?' the steward groaned again.

'Stop whining,' the mayor muttered, gazing at the flames with the same fear. 'Come on, we must wake the police chief. Let's get along there.'

Sergeant Boiangiu was just coming out of the gate, fully dressed, armed, and accompanied by two policemen. Someone had woken him shortly before, and he had instantly leapt out of bed.

'Well, Mr Mayor, what are we going to do now?' he asked dazed.

'We'll have to go to Ruginoasa, sergeant, and have a look!' the mayor answered gloomily. 'It's a good job somebody bothered to wake you. Nichifor, you run off quickly to the manor, and bring a servant with a cart, so that we shall get there faster.'

Meanwhile, as they waited, they gazed in horror at the huge blazing pile. The fire seemed to be steadily growing, spreading and approaching in a brilliant flood. Leonte exclaimed under his breath that several thousand cartloads of fodder were burning there, apart from the buildings and barns themselves. After that, nobody dared to so much as speak. It seemed as if the crackling of the flames could be heard in the heavy silence as they twisted and writhed across the heavens. Around lay the village, silent as the grave, sleeping or simulating sleep, underlining terror which ruled the atmosphere. Those in the road felt as if in every cottage and from every window greedy eyes were watching the glare of the fire, awaiting a secret sign or call.

Suddenly they saw a group of people approaching from the direction of Ruginoasa, whistling carelessly as if the fire they were leaving behind troubled them not at all. The nearer they approached, the bolder they appeared, seeming by their attitude to mock the group standing in front of the police station. As they passed one of them called out simply: 'Good evening!'

The mayor, the steward and the sergeant all quickly responded in a chorus: 'Good evening!'

For a moment the whistling ceased, as if a question or a reproach was expected. Then the tune was taken up again and some of them burst into laughter. After they had passed further down the road, one gave vent to a long loud whoop, as if wishing to rouse everybody from their sleep. Simultaneously, the knot of flames in the east leapt up, as if the human voice here had stoked the fire there. A stream of sparks shot into the air, and then spattered in a rain of falling stars, which, like a flock of wayward flaming birds moved by some mysterious power, poured towards Arad in a sinuous flight.

Recovering from the coma which had held all three of them in its grip, Sergeant Boiangiu muttered, his voice hoarse with fear: 'I think the revolution has come!'

Chapter Nine

THE FIRE

I

Thursday morning was heralded in Amara by a more crimson dawn than usual.

The terrestrial flames painting the horizon reddened with a deeper fury until the curved rim of the sun heaved up beyond, like a head bathed in new blood. Then, drowned in the light of day, the hectic glow died away behind the edging of flames which bordered the sky. As the air grew clearer, the number of rolls of smoke in the east grew bigger, like blackened arms reaching upwards, wringing their hands and raising them to the heavens.

As always, the peasants rose with the sun. They hung around their yards and gazed at the clear sky and especially at the streamers of smoke, raising their heads to smell the fumes, without either amazement or rejoicing, as if meeting something natural and inevitable. Some came out into the road to see, have a better view or to exchange a few words with a passer-by.

'A real fire, no joke!' Vasile Zidaru shouted from his yard to Leonte Orbişor, who lived a few cottages up and had come out into the road because he had heard his neighbour cough and spit. 'That's how it's been burning since midnight. The whole village could have lived like boyars for a year or more on what's gone up in flames there!'

'It can turn to smoke and ashes for all I care. It lay there long enough while we were perishing and nobody listened to us!' Leonte Orbişor replied in a high, plaintive voice, rubbing his chest with satisfaction as if some pain had been assuaged.

Further down the road, Mother Ioana, with a basket of corn on her arm, was feeding her chickens, cursing the greedy ones and defending the more timid, dispensing justice in her eternally scolding voice.

'Did you see the great fire, Mother Ioana?' Vasile asked her. 'Seems there's going to be a festival... What do you think, mother?'

The old woman turned her head towards him for a moment as if weighing him up, and then returned her attention to the chickens, muttering: 'That's the only thing people crowd together for, festivals, devil take them!'

Others who lived nearby came up, each with a question or an explanation, but after a few words, each waited for his fellow to give the saving command. Then, as their number grew, their faces became darker and their voices harsher, as if a barely controlled impatience weighed upon their souls, until Leonte Orbișor burst out angrily: 'Why are we standing here gawping? Haven't we got anything better to do? Come on, let's go up the village and see what's going on – we don't want to be left out of things!'

'That's right!' everyone exclaimed, as if he had expressed what lay deep in their hearts.

On their way, they met other groups, who joined them. The space before the inn looked like a fair-ground. Women and children were there too, mixing with the feverish crowd. Everyone spoke but little and quietly, as if each syllable was weighted; only occasionally a louder word fell, like the heavy drop of water from a storm cloud, causing heads to turn in amazement.

'Who's in there?' queried Vasile Zidaru, hearing a noise from within the inn.

'Quite a crowd,' answered Ignat Cercel, who was busily moving back and forth among the people, 'there's Marin, and young Dragoș, and Smaranda's Petrică – a good many, having a fine time, and for good reason.'

'What reason?' Vasile asked again.

'They know all right,' Ignat muttered portentously. 'Leave them alone, they know what they're doing.'

'Didn't I tell you, Uncle Vasil', that I saw them last night whistling as they came down the road?' put in Leonte Orbișor importantly. 'I came out to watch it burning and wondered who had done it. It was so big, and started in a lot of places at once, as if there were a good many of them.'

'They might have told us something about it, so that they shouldn't say afterwards that we held back, and leave us without any share!' put in a frail, decrepit old man.

'Well, if they had started asking everybody, they would never have done anything!' Ignat said significantly, as if he knew much more.

'That's how it is!' whispered some, nodding in agreement.

At that moment, a great gust of laughter shook a group on the perimeter of the crowd, and everyone moved in that direction. A happy, but envious voice was heard to say: 'So you've taken the axe with you, Teaderiță? You aren't by any chance looking for dry kindling in the woods right now?'

The question seemed so amusing, that another wave of laughter went through the crowd. Toader Strîmbu, his axe on his left arm, and his coat slung over his shoulder, also laughed, revealing his long, shining teeth, like the fangs of a hungry animal: 'Well, Uncle Iosif, we have to start with the kindling, that's how we were taught!'

Nicolae Dragoş, appeared at the door of the inn, his face sagging as if he had not closed his eyes all night, but nevertheless appearing livelier than usual. Catching sight of Toader Strîmbu, he called back over his shoulders into the inn: 'Come on, Petrică, don't hang about any longer: Toaderiţă has come!'

As he emerged on to the road, Petre followed him out of the inn, together with a crowd of others, mostly young men. Then the innkeeper appeared from behind and drew Nicolae back by the arm.

'What, my lads, you've drunk your fill, and now you're going to leave without paying? Is this the way to behave, Nicolae? You've drunk and . . .'

Petre cut him short contemptuously.

'Now look here, Uncle Christache, you'd better go back to your little bar, and not bother us. We'll pay you all right when we have the time! Get along, get along, leave it now.'

Astounded, Busuioc turned towards him, wanting to reply, but the young man threw him a contemptuous glance, adding in the same tone: 'Don't worry, Uncle Christache, we shan't forget you! We'll settle with you fairly, only wait till four turn comes! From now on we shan't postpone our settlements, you may be sure!'

Some of the people standing around laughed, others muttered to themselves. The innkeeper pale, and mumbled hoarsely: 'What have you got against me, Petrică, my boy. After all, I . . .'

Petre pushed him aside without answering, and addressed Toader Strîmbu: 'It's a good thing you came, we were just going to give up waiting. Look, the sun's up, it's getting on for noon, and we still haven't got started.'

'Oh, Petrică, there's plenty of time, nobody is chasing us!' Toader protested. 'I had to arrange about my children, they're all alone.'

Nicolae Dragoş cut their exchanges short. There were some twenty of them altogether who had been in the inn and were now ready to leave. At this juncture Chirilă Păun arrived, breathless from running, a knobbled staff in his hand.

'Wait, lads, wait! Don't go without me!' he shouted, hardly able to get his breath back. 'It would be a disgrace if I were to miss it, when you know very well what was done to my . . .'

'Well, we can't wait while you scratch your backside and . . .'
Nicolae cut in, without bothering to complete his sentence. Then, seeing that the group had doubled, he went on in a different tone:

'Don't all come crowding along! We're full up. And there are people waiting to give us a hand there, too, if necessary!'

The old man with the plaintive voice, who had pushed himself to the front, said once again complainingly: 'It seems to me you're off and doing everything yourselves, and not bothering about us! It's not fair . . .'

'Leave us in peace, old fellow. First we have some reckonings to make, and then we'll see that everything is done for the best, all of us!' Petre announced proudly, like a cockerel preparing to crow.

The group started off to Lespezi. Apart from Toader Strimbu with the axe, and Chirilă Păun with his stick, they were all empty-handed. Ilie Cîrlan was the proudest of all, looking back repeatedly and laughing at the crowd left standing, quite still, behind them: 'I wonder where they're going, in that direction!' asked Vasile Zidaru, after the group had gone a little way. 'Or are they still after Babaroaga?'

Busuioc the innkeeper, who was standing among those left behind, muttering to himself nervously, suddenly regained his courage, as if a peril had left him: 'Why did you ask where they are going, Vasile? Don't you see they've started the revolt? Better ask me what they've got against me! I haven't done any harm to anybody, brothers, and . . .'

Ileana, Dumitru Ciulici's daughter, slept near Nadina's door in the little room between the bedroom and the dining-room. The lady had made her lock all the doors, and had then herself tried them again to make sure they were all secured. She had told the girl that she was afraid of thieves, whereupon Ileana had laughed.

This morning, Ileana awoke, and went into the dining-room quietly, so as not to disturb the lady. She opened the front door under the porch, and the windows of the lounge and dining-room. She wanted to get on with the cleaning before the lady rose. Taking up her bedding, she went down the passage and through the kitchen towards her home. In the kitchen, along with the crackling fire, were her parents, morose and terrified.

'Come along, girl, don't dawdle like a boyar, this isn't the time to sleep!' her father greeted her. 'Something terrible has happened - this is all we lacked!'

Some time before, at sunrise, Dumitru had gone to wake the chauffeur, as he had been instructed. He had waited until the German had emerged from his little room, and then gone for his usual morning tour of the barns. When he had returned, he had found Rudolf lying by the gate, covered in blood and dirt, his head bashed in. Probably he had gone out into the road to get a better

view of the fire at Ruginoasa and those lying in wait for him there had leapt on him. Who it could be, he did not know, he said, but last night he had heard somebody say that the lady's German wouldn't get away until he had been thoroughly beaten up, because he had thrashed some children in Amara the day before yesterday. The steward had hoisted him on his back and carried him to his room, where he now lay like a log, although Dumitru had washed off the blood and bandaged his head. So Ileana must go and tell the lady, when she awoke, what had happened, and that she must decide what to do, because the chauffeur certainly would not be able to drive in that state. Nor would it be wise for the lady to stay much longer. The flames of Ruginoasa would be sure to spread, as the people were very bitter. Therefore, he had decided to set off for Gliganu as soon as the horse was fed, to tell his master what had happened.

Mayor Pravilă, Sergeant Boiangiu and Bumbu the steward returned exhausted, black with smoke and cinders. The cart turned into the manor yard, having paused for a moment in the street to allow two policemen to alight. Only with great difficulty was Boiangiu persuaded to present himself in front of boyar Miron, for he felt that his duty was to watch ceaselessly at the police station, so as not to be caught by a surprise attack by the villagers.

Miron Iuga was up and waiting; he had seen the flames at Ruginoasa and heard something from the servants of what had happened. His first reaction had been to call immediately for Ichim to harness the horses and go to the spot. Then he had changed his mind. As the steward had left, he must surely have done all that could be done. His own presence would only have caused trouble and precipitated other developments. Since yesterday, after the meeting called by the prefect, he had had a premonition that something was going to happen which could not be prevented. The prefect's intervention had been the finishing touch. An energetic attitude or authoritative gesture, accompanied by appropriate measures, would still have intimidated the latent anarchistic tendencies. Fear was the only basis for order with primitive people. The prefect had come in the spirit of mildness and conciliation, both signs of weakness, so that those who still hesitated were encouraged. In fact, Boerescu had tried out precisely what Grigore had wanted. The flames at Ruginoasa seemed to old Miron to confirm fully his prophecies.

He listened to the story the three recounted as calmly as if they had not been telling him that his property had been turned into ashes. They reported that the fire had started with the ricks of

fodder, but by the time it was discovered everything was burning and the flames had spread to the barns and stables. The servants there had rushed to save the animals, but, nevertheless, most of these had been burnt, for one could hardly get near the outhouses. Even if water had been available, and all the village had helped, it would have been very difficult to prevent the disaster. But the peasants had moved slowly; only those living near the place had got up to look after their own cottages. All the others had slept like the dead. Those who had been hanging around had taken their time about it, and all everyone had thought about was what they could filch. The sergeant said in his opinion the fire had been started by Amara people – that was what peasants whom he had questioned had told him, as well as a colleague who had arrived from Izvoru that morning.

‘Is there any hope of your discovering them?’ old Iuga asked suddenly in a more cheerful tone.

‘I think I could if . . .’

Boiangiu hesitated for some moments before frankly admitting that he did not dare to use his usual methods. The peasants had become very restless and quarrelsome, as for example yesterday, with the prefect. It was impossible to curb them any more with words or threats: neither did he feel able to use force for the moment, for he had not enough men, and feared to provoke a revolt of the whole village and bring down severe retribution on himself. Hence he had tried to maintain order in Amara at least, by indulgence and persuasion, which, as a matter of fact, was what his inspector had advised only yesterday. Otherwise, he would not have allowed the group of whistlers to pass by last night, doubtless with the incendiaries of Ruginoasa among them.

Miron Iuga admitted that in the present situation, which had been allowed to develop in this way, he sergeant was unable to do anything but defend his own skin. In fact, that was all he could do himself. The important thing now was to hold out until the authorities at last realized that the revolt which they had fomented was not just a masquerade like their demonstrations in Bucharest, and took the necessary measures. Nevertheless, he urged the mayor and the sergeant to do their duty.

‘There are some good people in the village, too; possibly they are more of them than the bad ones. Get them to move, so that they are not overcome by the malefactors, for they too are threatened by the coming catastrophe. What is Father Nicodim doing? Nobody must be allowed to forget that the time of reckoning will come, when everyone will have to pay!’

In the road in front of the manor at Lespezi, several peasants stood talking about the fire, seeing it as an omen, but not knowing

whether for good or for evil. Matei Dulmanu, who had been to Amara the previous evening, kept glancing down the road as if waiting for someone, and constantly muttering to himself: 'Only fire can burn away sin!'

The others nodded, and someone said that his words were full of meaning. Matei then caught sight of the group approaching from Amara, and said with relief: 'And don't worry, the time is coming when my meaning will be clear!'

The group from Amara had grown. Pavel Tunsu had joined them on the way, and others had tagged on from sheer curiosity.

All held council with Matei Dulmanu, and then divided into two groups. The majority went ahead with Nicolae Dragoş.

'Get along, get along with you, there are quite enough of us!' Petre said, 'and if we need people, Uncle Matei knows our watchword!'

'I'm staying with you, Uncle Petrică!' announced Ilie Cîrlan eagerly.

'And what are they here for, anyway?' asked Matei Dulmanu, indicating his group.

'Exactly!' Petre replied. 'But don't let us waste our time with a lot of talk – see how the others are hurrying?'

2

As far as she could, Nadina had transformed the manor bedroom according to her own tastes. Gogu and Eugenia had been satisfied with a relative amount of comfort in the country, being interested in utility rather than beauty. But Nadina would not renounce a minimum of chic even during odd nights spent in hotel rooms during her travels. The vast monumental double bed, of which Gogu was wont to say proudly that you could nestle in it as warmly as on your mother's breast, horrified Nadina not only by its choking softness, but also by its complete lack of proportion and taste. After taking a bath to wash away the effects of the journey, she had spent the first night on a simple, broad divan, which had been placed in the corner of the room next to the hall. From this side, one of the big windows, protected by an iron grill, gave a pleasant view over the flower garden outside. Last night, sleep had eluded her although she had needed it desperately to escape from the insistent fear which dominated her completely. She seemed constantly to hear steps, either in the garden or in the other rooms, or a hand knocking on the window, or somebody trying to turn a handle in the hall. Each time she began to fall into the drowsiness which precedes sleep, a new strange noise made her start and drove away her peace. It was

only towards morning, after she had listened for a while to the crowing of the village cocks, heralding the dawn, that she fell soundly asleep. And it was the crowing of a cock under her window that woke her now from a dream so delightful that she could not remember it, only retaining her pleasure and a regret that she could not go on dreaming it to the end. Without yet realizing where she was, she tried for a couple of moments, with closed eyes, to fall asleep again, and continue to dream, or at least to remember her dream. But instead, the ugly fears which she had fought all night rose again and she woke completely. But she did not dare to open her eyes, as if by seeing nothing she would be safer. Silence reigned supreme. First of all she was only conscious of the natural vibrations of the auditory nerves, which normally went unnoticed, palpitating like infinitely delicate murmurs. Then she felt the rhythmic beating of her heart within her bosom and after a time, which seemed an eternity, the sudden shrill sound emitted by an indignant hen in the garden resounded in her ears as clearly as if the window were wide open. This unexpected noise made her heart tremble for a moment, but as soon as she identified it her terror was transformed into confidence. She stretched out her hand towards the little table where she had laid her tiny gold watch.

'Eight o'clock!' she murmured, gazing at the dial. 'How tired I am! I don't want to get up at all! Still, I must leave! I'm late, I might have been on my way now, if . . . if only Rudolf is ready, I'll be in the car in half-an-hour. I wonder where the girl is!'

She began to call, singing out the name in long syllables: 'Ileana . . . Ilenuța . . . Where are you, Ilenuța . . . Ileana . . .'

After a couple of moments, the girl's head appeared round the door opening into the hall, quietly, not quite sure whether she had actually heard the lady's voice or only imagined it.

'Come along, my dear, come in. Are you up?' enquired Nadina, lazily stretching herself under the quilt, and snuggling like a kitten into the warmth. 'Has Rudolf got the car out?'

Ileana, pretty and clean, always wore a saucy smile, which Nadina approved. She had even asked if the girl would like to go with her to Bucharest. But now her smile was anxious: 'Has your mother been scolding you again, Ilenuța?' Nadina asked, noticing her expression. 'Come on now, don't be mopeable, it doesn't suit you!'

'Oh dear, my lady . . .'

The moment she began to speak, tears overcame her. Between sobs and gasps she managed to recount what had happened to the chauffeur, and that Ruginoasa was burning. Nadina, however, as if unable to grasp the meaning of the words, did not realize their

import immediately, and asked: 'All right, all right, but is the car ready? I must leave.'

When she did understand, she froze with terror in the bed, the quilt drawn up to her chin, gazing at Ileana with wide gleaming, glassy eyes. Only after some time did she murmur in a strange voice, exhausted and helpless: 'What shall I do now, Ileanuța? Now they will kill me too, now they will . . .'

The girl loved her, and pitied her in her fear. Suddenly regaining courage, she explained eagerly and confidently that her father had already left some time ago to go to the boyars at Gliganu and tell them what had happened, and the boyars would be coming in the best chaise to take her, so that she need not be afraid or worry at all. Besides, the people here were not villains and would not dare to do evil things. Nadina listened, but comprehended nothing. Nevertheless, the girl's voice calmed her and soothed the terror in her heart. Suddenly she threw the quilt aside and said hastily: 'Then better let me dress, so that they shall find me ready. Will you give me my dressing gown, dear, quickly, and then . . .'

Swinging round she put her feet into her soft slippers and stood up, taking off her nightgown and flinging it on to the bedclothes. She was quite naked, the way she always liked to go about in her own bedroom, among the mirrors reflecting the curves of her body, flattering her knowledge of her beauty. But now she had no intention of admiring her nakedness; the gesture had been instinctive. Although it was warm in the room, she shuddered.

'Come along, Ileanuța, come on, I feel chilly,' she murmured, hugging her breasts with her arms.

'My, how beautiful you are, my lady,' exclaimed Ileana ecstatically, bringing the dressing gown and seeing Nadina completely naked.

Nadina smiled involuntarily. Such admiration had always enchanted her. As the girl helped her into the soft, white silk negligé, and she put her second arm into the broad sleeve, voices were heard in the courtyard outside.

'I think the boyars have arrived, my lady!' Ileana cried joyfully.

'Go and see, dear, quickly,' Nadina whispered, in a voice dry with emotion. 'And come back and tell me!'

Ileana hurried out through the hall, and Nadina felt her heart leap with impatience. Her knees trembled. She folded the two halves of the gown in front of her and sat down on the divan, listening with strained desperation. Only a confused noise could be made out, from which the timbre of a vaguely familiar voice emerged. She tried to identify the voice of the lease-holder or the lawyer, but could not, as if she could no longer remember them.

'But supposing it's not them?' the thought flashed through her brain.

Her heart was gripped so painfully that she wanted to cry out.

At that moment she distinctly heard the sound of hurrying steps in the hall. Then the door was flung open violently as if it would leap from its hinges and before her there appeared a young, strong, bony peasant, his black *cadiculd* jauntily on one side, his dark eyes frowning, a black peasant waistcoat over his long white tunic and heavy boots on his feet. Closing the door, Petre Petre planted himself firmly in front of Nadina: 'Lady, why do you . . .'

His voice was suddenly cut off, as if a furious hand had gripped his throat. In her first moment of horror, Nadina had begun to rise, but her knees would not support her, so that she had fallen back to the edge of the divan. The wings of her *négligé* fell open, revealing her breasts, stomach and legs without her even noticing it. She gazed with terrified eyes at this peasant who had burst into her room. In a fraction of a second she recognized him as the man who had driven her round in the sledge, when the horses had taken fright. At the time his unusual strength and quiet confidence had impressed her, and now this same man had come to kill her. She heard his hoarse question and at the same moment saw his eyes. The next, she noticed that his voice had changed, and a new gleam had replaced the frown. She had observed this greedy, disturbed glitter in the eyes of almost every man and had always enjoyed it, seeing it as the surest proof of the passion her beauty aroused. The peasant's look seared her like a flame, she felt it on her flesh, and suddenly realized that her body was exposed. Leaping to her feet, she pulled the *négligé* across her breasts and began to call out desperately. 'What do you want? . . . Help . . . No! . . . Help!'

Petre interpreted her cries as an appeal. His blood surged in his veins, and his face reddened, even to his eyes. He saw nothing except her face, all the more desirable in its terror, and the frothy white robe through which he glimpsed her flesh. Instinctively, he stretched out his arms with their great knobbed hands, trying to stem some emotion which could no longer be controlled and stammered helplessly: 'Well . . . why . . . shouldn't I . . .'

Nadina tried to rush to the other window. One of her wide sleeves touched his outstretched arm, and his fingers clutched at it involuntarily.

'Leave me alone . . . leave me . . . Help! . . . No! . . .' she cried, trying to tear her sleeve from his grasp.

Suddenly she felt his strong arm encircle her waist. With a quick lizard-like movement she writhed away from him, leaving the robe in his hands, and ran naked across the corner near the dining-room, crouching behind an armchair. The soft sheen of her skin inflamed the desire of the man even more, and, flinging the dressing gown towards her as if inviting her to cover herself, he

approached the chair with open arms, in a sort of hide-and-seek.

'Don't come near me! Help! . . . What do you want!' Nadina cried, her head appearing above the back of the chair, following his movements with terror-stricken eyes.

As Petre came nearer to the armchair, Nadina leapt out of her hiding place, wanting to get to the door opening on to the hall, and from there, outside. But Petre's long arm stopped her, clamping round her waist.

'Let me alone! . . . Help! . . .'

Petre raised her like a doll, placing his other arm under her legs, and turned her towards him, leaning his head back so that he could look into her eyes. Tossing like a captured bird, she met his burning glance and saw his expression, flooded with a tremendous joy. She began to hammer with her fists at his face and head, knocking off his *căciulă* and hitting his eyes, in which desire leapt like a flame. He suffered all her blows as if they were caresses until, to avoid them, he buried his face in her stomach. Nadina had not even felt his rough arms, holding her up and pressing against her hips and waist, but now she felt his moustache and his hot lips rubbing harshly against her skin. As she struggled, her body slipped down until the peasant's mouth reached and sank between her small, round breasts, and on one his thirsty lips paused, nuzzling into it for some moments, and finally biting at it as if it were a ripe peach.

'You're hurting me! Help! . . . Let me go! . . . ' Nadina cried, and once more began to rain blows at his head.

Then she realized that as he kissed and held her close Petre moved towards the divan with its rumpled quilt, from which she had risen shortly before. With his head still hidden between her breasts, and led only by an instinctive desire, he slowly laid her down on her back across the divan, one arm still round her waist and steadying himself with the other. Nadina sank her fingers into his hair, shaking his head frantically. Suddenly she felt his hand heavily thrusting down between her tightly closed legs, making a space for his knees. Then she felt the same hand roughly fumbling at her stomach. Writhing helplessly beneath his weight, her head hung swaying over the side of the divan: 'I don't want to . . . Help! . . . Help!'

Petre raised his head from between her breasts and muttered hoarsely: 'Be still . . . I'm not going to bite . . . That's right!'

Nadina felt a shudder of pain. For some few moments she continued to toss to and fro, then her screams became weaker and her hands merely struck at him like tired wings. Her sobbing became a series of rhythmic moans, dominated by his panting breath. With her eyes closed, her lips parted and her head swinging continuously from side to side, Nadina unconsciously clasped her

arms round the neck of the man as he drove her body into an intoxicating shudder, and felt herself penetrated by an intense happiness, as if she were tasting an unknown, bitter-sweet, and unimaginably beautiful secret.

She lay quite still, her eyes closed and then suddenly heard Petre's voice, slightly mocking, as if from a huge distance: 'You see, lady, you shouted and wriggled in vain! And I haven't . . .'

Nadina rose as if she had awoken from a nightmare, and covered her naked flesh with the nightgown, which lay near, hiding her face in her hands, feeling only a profound disgust for her body, which up till now she had adored.

Petre picked his *căciulă* up from the floor and put it on his head. He stayed for a moment looking closely at Nadina, as if only now did he see her properly and muttered to himself, shrugging: 'Lady or no lady . . .'

Then he added in a voice which he intended to appear authoritative: 'If you value your life, lady, you must run! You hear me? You must run at once, otherwise . . .'

Nadina gazed at him uncomprehendingly, for, while defending her body, she had forgotten the real danger. Looking at him, she suddenly realized, remembered and whimpered: 'Where shall I run? Save me! What shall I do?'

Petre did not want to let himself be moved, and repeated more harshly: 'Do as the Lord tells you, lady. Only don't hesitate too long.'

As he muttered the last syllables, he left her. Nadina heard his boots against the floor. She stumbled round for her stockings, whispering through dry lips, as if somebody could hear her.

'I must go . . . Where shall I go? . . . My God, my God, where shall I go?'

3

Going on his usual nightly tour, Platamonu had seen the glare of the fire in the east and said to himself it must be in Teleorman, right on the county border, or maybe at Izvoru. In any case it was a sign that the revolt was approaching and would burst out here too in a couple of days. He decided, therefore, that he would take advantage of Nadina's departure to get a lift as far as Pitești. He must wake his wife to consult with her as to what they should take besides money and jewellery.

He even awoke Aristide, who habitually slept until noon, earlier than usual.

The young man was rather cross at having his sweetest sleep

broken, and remarked sarcastically that his father was becoming as nervous as lawyer Stavrat who had trembled ever since his arrival. Nevertheless he rose, for in fact he was even more afraid himself and was only making a show of heroism so as to impress his father, whose devotion he abused and took advantage of in every possible manner.

By about seven o'clock the three of them were ready for the road, to say nothing of Olimp Stavrat, who had been prepared since the day before, and had dozed fully dressed to avoid being surprised by a nocturnal attack. Platamonu naturally said nothing to the servants or the rest of the household about their departure, for he did not want to give the alarm and encourage the peasants to do mischief. Once they had left, let it be as the Lord willed.

At half past eight, as they waited impatiently for Nadina, who would not depart from her usual fussy, dilatory habits even at a time of danger like this, Dumitru Ciulici suddenly appeared. After a moment of consternation, lawyer Stavrat expressed his indignation by exclaiming: 'This lady will be the ruination of us all!' and asking why madam had not come with this decent fellow in his cart - it would not have lowered her prestige - instead of making them all stand about for heaven knew how long till the peasants came and slaughtered them. Aristide proposed that Dumitru Ciulici should go back in their coupé and bring the lady, during which time they should prepare the chaise to take them to Costeşti. Platamonu, however, thought it wiser to leave at once in the big chaise, passing through Lespezi to pick up Nadina, and going on from there through Cantacuzu to the high road, which would be secure and probably guarded by the police or the army. He therefore gave orders for the horses to be harnessed immediately.

They all sat in the porch waiting for the chaise, and asking Dumitru Ciulici for details. Mrs Platamonu was running about the house, weeping and beseeching the servants to look after her things and she would not forget them, either. Dumitru, standing at the foot of the steps, twisting his *căciulă* in his hands, was just saying that the people at Lespezi were quiet, and regretted that work had not begun, when a crowd of some forty peasants burst noisily through the gate, some waving sticks. The three sat petrified at the top of the steps. Within a moment the porch was surrounded, everybody jostling and cursing in an effort to be in front. Only Dumitru stood bareheaded in the midst of the furious crowd. The servants came from the outbuildings, amazed, and the driver appeared bringing the horses for the chaise, which was drawn up ready.

Recovering himself, Platamonu stood up and said, amazed but friendly: 'What's happened, my men? Who has angered you?'

Dozens of furious voices, one louder than the other, answered him

simultaneously, cursing, swearing and threatening, all combining into a deafening din from which only fragments of foul language could be distinguished. Platamonu, his eyes starting out of his head, recognized among the rage-distorted faces the features of peasants from Amara, Lespezi and Gliganu. His eyes came to rest on Chirilă Păun, who was more to the front, alongside the teacher's brother, Nicolae Dragoș and he said mildly: 'Tell me, Chirilă, what's the matter, what do you want from us? You know very well, I never hesitate to . . .'

Chirilă Păun began in his habitual modest voice, but as he spoke he mounted the four steps of the porch, leaning on the new, still green stave he held in his left hand.

'Well, they'll tell you themselves what they want, they have mouths. But I have a reckoning to make with this villain for Gherghina.'

He reached the porch, and as he uttered the word 'villain' he rushed at Aristide, who still sat there dazed, wearing a stupid smile, striking him so hard in the face that the smack reverberated as loudly as if he had hit him with a spade.

'Don't beat him, Chirilă!' Platamonu began to shout.

At that moment, however, the peasants burst over them, using fists and feet, and throwing them on to the floor of the porch. Lawyer Stavrat shouted desperately: 'Don't kill me, brothers, I'm not from here! Oh, my god!'

The cries of Mrs Platamonu and the other women from within mingled with the scuffling and shouting. The blows had only lasted a couple of moments, however, when the voice of Nicolae Dragoș was heard commandingly: 'Whoa - stop! Leave him, Uncle Chirilă. We didn't come all the way here only to knock him about! Stop hitting, lads, do you hear me? We've come to geld this Greek, so that he won't ride other people's girls and womenfolk any more!'

There was a moment of stupefaction. Several voices asked: 'What did he say?' Others cried: 'They want to castrate him,' while others raged: 'Better kill him, he'll be no loss.' Aristide, stunned by the wave of blows which had rained on him, and lying among the boots and sandals of the peasants, wondered if he could move a little to one side and then disappear. But his father began to shriek desperately: 'Forgive him, Chirilă! Have mercy on him, lads! Nicolae, forgive him!'

Nobody paid any attention. A voice shouted: 'See to the old people!' and others added: 'Make way, get to the side.'

Nicolae Dragoș caught Aristide by one of his legs, for the latter had managed to worm his way a little distance in the meantime, and pulled him back to the centre, turning him on his back. Then he started shouting like a corporal allotting fatigues: 'Come on Terente

and Vasilică, get hold of his hands. You Costică, sit on him; don't let him move. And you hold his legs – that's right! Hold tight, boys! Come on, Uncle Chirilă, out with your knife, you've gelded enough swine, you're a master at it.'

He started to open the flies of Aristide's trousers. Realizing what was in store for him, the young Greek began to rave desperately.

'Open his legs, lads!' shouted Chirilă Păun, getting down carefully on to his knees, the knife in his right hand. 'Hold him fast!'

The peasants all crowded round, greedily taking in the spectacle. Platamonu threw himself madly into their midst: 'Don't cut him, Chirilă! Oh, my God! Rather kill me, lads!'

Several arms barred his way and he received a number of blows, while Chirilă's voice was heard from the centre, saying reproachfully: 'That's how I cried, when I saw my Gherghina with a big belly, while this thieving villain laughed and jeered.'

Aristide uttered a scream which made the air reverberate.

'Help! . . . Help! . . . Oh my God! . . . Father, don't let them!'

As Aristide's shrieks of pain became hoarser, turning into groans and then to sobbing gasps, Chirilă Păun continued to cut, talking quietly as if he were working on a young pig: 'Now shut up, my young cockerel, shut up; you've insulted our womenfolk enough, from now on you'll behave yourself. . . Ah, how my heart bled all through the winter, how miserably I complained to everybody. . .'

Nicolae Dragoş watched sullenly, muttering and glancing from time to time at Platamonu, who was a little farther off, writhing in the hold of several peasants, screaming and sobbing.

'There, that's it, look at them,' said Chirilă rising to his feet.

'Lay them on his chest, Uncle Chirilă. Let him stew them!' said Nicolae Dragoş in a thick voice, turning away in disgust.

Several men burst out laughing, some shouting followed, and the noise, which had died down for a while, broke forth again. Aristide was left lying groaning on the floor of the porch. His father tore himself away from the arms of the peasants, and threw himself across his son: 'My darling boy, my darling boy . . . Oh, the villains!'

Chirilă Păun and Nicolae Dragoş went down the steps into the yard, the others following them noisily. Platamonu, suddenly coming to himself, called for his wife, who had fainted several times with horror, telling her that they must leave immediately for Costeşti at least, and see a doctor, otherwise the boy would die. Then, with a desperate effort, he raised his son from the ground, taking him in his arms like a child, and moved off with him through the crowd of noisy peasants, who stepped aside despite themselves and made room for him to cross the yard to where the chaise stood waiting, with the driver fussing around near it, stupefied. As he walked heavily along, bearing his burden, his wife following with

two elderly maid-servants, the lease-holder shouted: 'Mitrofan, Mitrofan, put the horses in, quickly, we have to go to the hospital, otherwise the boy will die!'

Hearing and seeing him, the crowd was moved by the father's grief. Only Dragoş burst out in the same contemptuous hatred: 'Get along, get along, maybe the doctor will stick them back on again for him.'

But nobody laughed any more. All watched the lease-holder seating himself in the chaise, still holding Aristide in his arms, while Mrs Platamonu covered them up and then mounted alongside the driver herself, Dumitru Ciulici and the two maid-servants anxiously assisting them. The horses started towards the gate. As they passed the group, Platamonu, his eyes streaming and his voice grief-stricken, cried: 'All right, Chirilă, the Lord is above and will hit you harder than you've hit me!'

'You've done enough to me, without waiting for the Lord!' Chirilă Păun answered.

'Sod you, you dirty Greeks,' Nicolae Dragoş cursed between clenched teeth.

The chaise rattled out through the gate. After a few moments Nicolae said more calmly: 'Well, we've finished what we came to do; now we can go home. There are other things to be done.'

He met the dissatisfied gaze of a powerful youth, who said: 'What's that, cousin? We haven't risen just to geld the Greek's son, have we?'

'D'you want us to teach you what to do once you've got rid of the boyars?' asked Dragoş, getting angry. 'Haven't you got a head with brains in it, or are you sucklings? Come on Uncle Chirilă! Come on, lads from Amara, we shall know what to do without asking others!'

'That's right, that's right!' answered several voices. 'The Lord be with you, we shan't be idle either!'

Nevertheless, after the Amara people had gone, the group left in the yard of the manor stood confused, so that somebody even exclaimed: 'What was all this going on?'

Then suddenly, furious at their own impotence, they began to shout, each louder than his fellow, cursing and urging: 'Set fire to it, like Ruginoasa . . . Stop, don't, why should we go home empty-handed; why make a fire, instead of each taking something? The barns are full. Holy Mother of our Lord! Come on, boys, don't hesitate! Are you afraid, Ion? Now we haven't any boyars any more!'

Somebody rushed over to the porch, where the servants busied themselves, weeping, and the others surged after like a flock of sheep. The women ran into the house shrieking with terror. More and more peasants kept coming from the road, having heard that

people were gathering at the manor. Those who had entered the house, were pushing around violently, making a lot of noise and breaking various objects as if fighting a mortal enemy. They emerged one by one, with different articles, whatever each thought the most precious, taking them home, shouting their satisfaction and hastening back to get something else before all was laid waste. Those who had come later were ferreting in the yard, many of them already hanging round the barns. The manor became an ant-hill of men, women and children, all obsessed with the idea that no one should take more than they did.

In the meantime lawyer Stavrat, after first being dazed by the hail of blows, had taken advantage of the crowd gathering round young Platamonu to make his way back into the house. For two days he had examined all the exits for just such an emergency. He went through the kitchen into the back of the building, emerging into the small yard. Though still dizzy from the blows and the kicks, he had the presence of mind not to hide in any of the outhouses, as he had first intended; instead he climbed the fence around the vegetable garden and started off bravely across the field for the highroad, skirting the cottages of the village. Never would he have thought that at fifty-six he would be capable of such extraordinary physical effort. He had forgotten his weak heart and incipient asthma, and that the doctor had told him he should not run. Perspiring, and with a great elation which gave him renewed strength; slightly bent to avoid observation, like a hunter in the mountains, he succeeded in making his way across the sticky furrows, dotted with puddles. The last cottage! He was tempted to pause to take breath and wipe off his perspiration, but overcame his weakness and continued his diagonal route towards the highroad. Suddenly he caught sight of a chaise, recognized it and began to shout, but his voice was lost in the rattle of the wheels. For a moment he was overcome with despair. What if he should meet a mob of peasants on his way? The chaise, its horses galloping, went on its way, gradually growing smaller in the distance.

'How stupid these peasants are!' the lawyer exclaimed bitterly to himself. 'First they attack the lease-holder to murder him, and then they let him go in the chaise . . . If I had known, I would have stayed there and not bothered to come through all these puddles.'

4

'I must leave at once!' Nadina muttered to herself over and over again, dressing with desperate haste, as if the house were on fire. 'Where's my hat? . . . Oh, I must go!'

She had gathered together her toilet articles, her watch and several other small objects and pushed them into the red leather bag bearing her monogram in gold lettering. As she passed the mirror, she glanced at it involuntarily and was horrified to see an apparent stranger.

'Poor me!' she murmured dazedly. 'And all this only because . . . I must go quickly, I . . .'

Petre had passed through the hall on to the porch and descended into the courtyard, where others from Lespezi had gathered. Toader Strîmbu was arguing with Dumitru Ciulici's wife, because Ileana kept trying to return to the house to get to her lady, while Toader continuously barred her way, even pushing her, and the girl began to cry.

'It's a good job you've come, Petre, these women want to eat me!' said Toader, and then with a suggestive grin: 'Well, you stayed quite a time, Petre – or maybe the lady wouldn't let you go when she found you were good at it?'

'Shut up,' Toaderiță, don't be coarse!' said the young man, frowning. 'You're a human being, after all, not a goat! I've taught her enough of a lesson, don't you worry . . . And now she's going, and leaving us the estate and everything!'

'Good work!' said a couple of men from Lespezi.

Toader Strîmbu, however, reddened suddenly: 'Why, Petrică, was this what we were going to do? Have I walked off my feet coming here for nothing?'

'What else do you want, Toaderiță?' Petre asked him.

'Wasn't it you yourself who said that she had jeered at us enough, and . . .'

'Did she jeer at you or at me?'

'Well, if you leave it at that, it's your business,' said Toader heatedly. 'But I am a widower and bursting for it, and . . . Come on, Ilie, hold this!' he suddenly added, turning toward Ilie Cîrlan and passing his axe into Ilie's arms. 'I'm not going to be led by others who . . .'

Muttering, he rushed up into the porch and disappeared into the house. Ileana, horrified, caught Petre by the sleeve, crying: 'Petrică, don't let him kill her!'

'She can go to hell, if she didn't pay heed to what I said' the young man muttered angrily, then mastering himself: 'I told her . . .'

The moment Toader entered the hall, Nădina, dressed and carrying her bag, emerged from the bedroom. Seeing her, the peasant approached, saying mockingly: 'And where are you off to, my little dove? Stay here and give me a kiss!'

For a fraction of a second Nadina hesitated, and then shot like lightning into the lounge, locking the door. Toader, inflamed,

broke down the door with his shoulder without even trying the handle.

'Help! . . .' Nadina screamed, her eyes staring out of her head.

'Ah, I'm not to your liking, lady, am I?' Toader grinned. 'Never mind, I like you!'

Flinging her to the ground, he pushed her skirts up to her waist. With a supreme effort, Nadina continued to scream: 'Help! Help!'

'Stop screeching, you bloody bitch!' muttered the peasant, gripping her by the throat with both hands.

Nadina's voice broke as if torn out by the roots . . .

A few minutes later, Toader Strimbu reappeared on the porch, Nadina's bag hidden beneath his coat, and a leer of satisfaction on his face. He took back his axe from Ilie and said in a thick voice: 'Go on Ilie, you have a go, she might still be warm!'

The others looked at him with fearful curiosity, but Ileana burst out: 'Oh Lord, he's killed the lady for certain! . . . Murderer! . . . Murderer . . .'

'My God!' Petre exclaimed. 'Did you do that, Toaderiță?'

Toader Strimbu answered calmly: 'She just died like a chicken! I hardly touched her, I only tried to stop her shouting and she didn't breathe any more . . .'

'My God!' Petre repeated miserably. 'It's bad business now, Toaderiță. From now on . . .'

The peasant looked at Petre and then at the others with an amazement which gradually turned into indignation and then to fury. The long bristles ruffled up on his broad unshaven face and his small deep-set blood-shot eyes glowed like live coals fanned by a terrible wind. He began to rave like a maddened beast, moving to and fro as if he trod barefoot on burning embers, foaming and stammering.

'So what if she died? Didn't my wife die because she had starved for days, and I couldn't even take her to the doctor? Did any boyar bother himself to ask why Toader Strimbu's wife had died? Even today I'm in debt to the priest and others for the funeral, and my children are starving. I haven't got a piece of land as big as my palm; I'm withered up with toiling till my eyes drop out of my head, and still I can't feed my children . . . so why should you be angry with me because I've finished her off, instead of spitting at her, dead as she is. She only came here for her luxury and comfort, so as not to leave the land to us, but to give it to other boyars like her. I'm going to kill every one of them; every time one comes across my path, I'm going to strike him with my axe, so that no boyar's feet, nor any shoot nor seed of them shall survive!'

Raising his axe, he circled it wildly above his head, his hoarse voice came now loud, now low, like a broken trumpet: 'I've had

my bellyful of suffering! Now I want my satisfaction! . . . Only the blood of the boyars will cool the burning in my breast!

He tore with the axe towards the manor windows, which were shattered in turn with their frames. Infected by his destructive fury, the other peasants rushed after him with whatever weapon lay at hand, intent on breaking and wrecking. Dumitru's wife cried out and tore at her hair lest they should harm her property too. At the same time Ileana ran into the house to see what had happened to the lady Nadina. Pavel Tunsu had had his eye on the motor from the very beginning. In one of the storehouses he had discovered a pickaxe, and now began to strike the car with it, all the more furiously when he found it did not fall to pieces immediately, before his eyes. However, seeing that the petrol tank was pierced, he put the pickaxe down and, going to the loft above the barn next door, tore out a handful of hay which he twisted into a strand. Feeling in his pocket for matches, he painstakingly ignited this and, having waited until the flame had sprung up, threw it on to the pool of petrol which had collected under the machine. The car was suddenly surrounded with a bluish flame, which shot up to the rafters, licking round into the adjoining hay-loft. Within a few moments all the outbuildings were smothered in a huge cloud of smoke, in which yellow tongues writhed restlessly.

'Fire! Fire!' burst with a savage joy from the throats of the peasants.

'Ah, how it warms my heart!' exclaimed Toader Strimbu, his face shining with perspiration, and running towards the burning buildings as if longing to throw himself into the conflagration.

Near the porch Petre Petre stood confounded, gazing like one in a dream at the people swarming in the courtyard. Only much later did he observe that Matei Dulmanu also stood still in the same place.

'Come on, Petrică, let's bring the lady out of the house. The fire will burn her, and it would be a shameful thing to leave her to that.'

'You're right, Uncle Matei!' Petre quickly agreed. 'The people have gone completely crazy.'

At that moment Ileana emerged from the ill-fated house, holding in her arms the body of Nadina, wrapped in a white sheet.

5

Drapelul seemed to be in mourning. When Titu Herdelea arrived in the office at ten he did not find even Roșu at his famous desk, piled with newspapers. Apparently the secretary had been there but had gone out some little time before, leaving a message that he would be back in half an hour.

Young Herdelea was late because on his way he had called in to see Modreanu at the Ministry of the Interior in order to obtain some information about Argeş county, as he had promised Grigore Iuga. He had not succeeded in finding out anything. Grigore had telephoned the head of the prefect's office in Piteşti the previous day and had been told that Prefect Boerescu was out in the county, but was expected to return during the night. For the time being, however, all was quiet, and there was no news of any disturbances anywhere, although the danger of contagion was great, because Teleorman, where the madness raged, was very near. Titu had looked for Grigore the whole afternoon, and had only found him in the evening at Predeleanu's. Grigore had excused himself by remarking jokingly that whenever Titu wanted to be sure to find him, he should always ask first of all at the Predeleanu's, because lately he spent more time there than at home. Herdelea smiled. He had observed that apart from Victor's friendship, Miss Olga Postelnicu's charming eyes were not indifferent to young Iuga's attentions.

Titu had met Gogu Ionescu the same day in the afternoon. Gogu had also telephoned Piteşti. He was very depressed, and his eyes were continuously moist; his soul was filled with foreboding, however much Eugenia tried to soothe him.

Naturally, Titu arranged his time so as to be home by five o'clock, when Tanţa was to call. He was there punctually, and the two rushed into each other's arms, weeping a little at the joy of reunion. The 'important thing' she had mentioned in her note turned out to be not so portentous. Jenică had left Mrs Alexandrescu three days after Titu had moved; it had not been Jenică who had demanded that Titu should move, but the landlady herself who had wanted the room because Mimi had finally been turned out by her husband; Mrs Alexandrescu had tried to start a row and had come to their place and created a horrible scene with everybody – even loudly accusing Tanţa of having been tumbled by the lodger; Jenică had parted with her for good, despite this, and had immediately become engaged to the daughter of his assistant director – as a matter of fact, he had behaved like a real gentleman, energetically refuting Mrs Alexandrescu's imputations to his parents. Titu listened to all this with much interest; firstly because Tanţa recounted it, and secondly because he took a passionate interest in anything which concerned her. He told her with emotion that if only his position were even moderately assured he would marry her tomorrow, but in any case she must belong to him for ever. As a token of this, he went on, in place of all other endearments from now on he would only call her 'my fiancée'.

'So here you are, Herdelea! Bravo!' murmured Roşu, entering and finding Titu with his nose in the newspapers. 'So

that's that, my dear fellow – in the afternoon we shall have a new government!

After looking through several papers, he added: 'Do you see how these honourable gentlemen have changed their line? No more talk about the sacred struggle of the peasants. Now they are 'agitators', against whom firm repressive measures must be taken. Didn't I prophesy all this to you some three weeks ago, my dear fellow? You'll soon see how they'll get the cannons out to crush it and they were glorifying it as a sacred struggle up to yesterday! Don't you see? They kept repeating "Sacred struggle" and "not a drop of Rumanian blood must be shed" until yesterday – that is, until the hour when they knew for sure that they would take office. Which means that they knowingly and unscrupulously set the country on fire! The ruin of the nation was nothing to them, the only thing was to get into office, even if it were in a shattered country. It's no good, my friend, they're a vile lot! I don't go in for politics, and to me, parties, with their so-called ideologies, mean nothing. But this lot are just scum!'

Here, the telephone rang, and interrupted his indignation.

'Hallo! . . . Yes, yes *Drapelul*. Mr Herdelea? Yes . . . Here he is.'

It was Gogu Ionescu asking for news, for it had been impossible to get through to Pitești today. Titu promised that he would call on Gogu after seeing Modreanu.

'Yes, poor souls, all agitated and suffering, just because these gentlemen must get in, whatever the means!' the secretary resumed, as if the interruption had inflamed his feelings even more. 'And how many more will suffer, how much blood will be shed! These people will massacre the peasants just as freely as they urged them on to revolt! More than that, I assure you that they will even discover some agitators. Not, of course, the minister who announced that this struggle was sacred, oh no, my dear fellow! It will be you or me, or some little teacher or priest who is not in their party: a socialist . . .'

The telephone interrupted him again. It was Grigore announcing his intention of calling for Titu to go with him to the Ministry of the Interior. For the next hour and a half Roșu poured out all his political sagacity to his docile listener.

Although very busy, especially because of the change in government, Modreanu received Grigore Iuga most affably, reminding him of their meeting in the train and the conversation of Rogojinaru. That morning he said, there had been a telephone call from Pitești reporting that during the night peasants had set fire to a manor in the south of the county, in the hamlet of Ruginița or Ruginoasa – the name had not been clear, because the prefect, who had telephoned personally, had been very upset and stammering. Modreanu added that in order to obtain full information about Argeș he had

called up Pitești about an hour ago, and the prefect had told him that telephone communications with the lower part of the county were either out of order or destroyed, so that he would have no new information unless any messengers arrived. The prefect had added that he had given the news of the fire in the hamlet of Ruginoasa, just as he had received it over the telephone from Costești, but he personally would not vouch for its accuracy; perhaps it was merely a joke in bad taste, for he himself had only come back from a tour of the county the previous evening and had seen that perfect order reigned in that area.

'Your prefect may be an extremely distinguished gentleman, but he has an excessively robust optimism,' Modreanu smiled.

Grigore Iuga thanked him warmly. They discussed the change in the government for a couple of minutes, Grigore remarking that the post of prefect in Argeș would probably go to his friend, lawyer Baloleanu. That, at least, was what he had been told by Baloleanu himself. Modreanu, of course, knew the lawyer and thought he would make an excellent prefect, especially in those troubled times.

On the way, Grigore said to Titu that if Baloleanu actually did become prefect, he would accompany him on his way to Amara. He admitted that he was very worried about the old man's fate. Pausing on the pavement in front of the Teatrul Național, Grigore consulted his watch, and murmured in anguish: 'Half past twelve . . . My God, I wonder what is happening in Amara now?'

6

By noon, the whole of Amara knew what had been done by those who had left for Lespezi and Gliganu in the morning. As the news passed from mouth to mouth, the events naturally grew in size. It was said, for instance, that both Greeks, father and son, had been castrated, that the women had been killed with an axe by a man from Gliganu and that they had cut out the tongue of the lawyer from Bucharest and sent him running through the fields dressed only in his underpants. At Lespezi all the men had first had what they wanted out of the beautiful lady, and finally Toader Strimbu had wrung her neck like you would a chicken's, and then flung her into the fire, while Pavel Tunsu had beaten up the German so much that he had died. However, the peasants had come back in ones and twos, and not in the compact group in which they had departed, so that nobody had noticed them when they returned to their homes, Pavel Tunsu alone came yelling like a madman, and it seemed someone had seen Toader Strimbu carrying a heavy sack

over his shoulder, which others had heard was full of gold coins and jewels taken from the dead lady.

Mayor Pravilă had left his clerk at the office, while he himself stayed at home. He knew everything that was going on in the village, but wished to abstain from any interference of any sort. He had learned that certain individuals intended to give him a sound thrashing and set fire to his houses because they nourished bitter feelings towards him for some wrong he had done them; therefore he felt it was wiser to let the villagers proceed with their lunacy just as their brains might guide them. Why should he place his life and property in danger because people had gone mad? The authorities would soon bring them back to their senses, and then they would repent bitterly. Until then, however, he would have to dance to their tune, in order to avoid ruination.

The clerk, Chiriță Dumitrescu, bored with his solitude in the office, called in the two watchmen and discussed events with them. He disapproved of and despised the peasants' savagery, and sided enthusiastically with the boyars, considering himself a member of their class. As he spoke, he constantly admired himself or adjusted his collar and tie in his little mirror, which stood on the desk.

In the morning, after his return from Ruginoasa and his talk with old Miron, Mayor Pravilă had had a friendly clash with Boiangiu between the Iuga manor and the police station. Both wanted to wriggle out of the responsibility of policing and maintaining order in the village. Pravilă declared roundly that he washed his hands of the affair, and had no further power. After cursing everything in general, the sergeant bitterly remarked that the police were always supposed to do the dirty work, adding threateningly: 'Don't drive me out of my wits, or I'll shoot you all like crows, you bloody clods!'

Although Boiangiu made this outward show of courage, inwardly he was at a loss. He thought that he would have a little rest for the time being, for last night he had hardly had time to close his eyes before he had been awakened, and now he was tired out. But he had no chance to do so. He had to wrangle for an hour with Didina; it would have come to blows if the corporal had not intervened. Then he had learnt about the group of peasants who had left for Lespezi - not of course with peaceful intentions, then more news had come about what the peasants had done, and finally Lazăr Oduduci, the head servant of lease-holder Coana Buruiană, had arrived all in a fright, saying that a lot of people were hanging round the manor and he was afraid they might set fire to it.

Meanwhile, having ended the argument with his wife, he held a sort of council with the four policemen. As there were few of them, they had to appear to ignore both those disorders which had taken

place in neighbouring villages, and those which were to come. They would close their eyes even to lesser evils in Amara; as they had done already in fact, since agitation had begun here a few days ago. But they would resolutely put down any wrecking or starting of fires. If the need arose, the whole station would turn out, to make a more powerful impression. Their rifles, however, would not be loaded beforehand, this would be done on the spot, in order to impress the people further. If, however – and God forbid it – he should be compelled to give the order to fire, they would first aim over the heads of the people, and only if this did not have the desired effect would they actually shoot direct. In order to be ready for any eventuality, nobody should leave the police station, and their equipment and arms should be at hand.

‘Oduduie,’ he then said to Buruiană’s servant, ‘you are only seeing revolution everywhere you look, even if it is only two people talking. That’s the measure of your courage, Oduduie!’

‘I can’t hold off the people any more, sergeant,’ answered Lazăr Oduduie resignedly. ‘You can do as you please, I had to tell you, so that when the boyars come back they won’t accuse me of not taking care of their property.’

Later, the sergeant sent Bogza, the most quick-witted of his men, to go and assess the situation on the spot. The news the policeman brought back more than confirmed the report. The manor had not actually been touched so far, but there was chaos there, with people carrying away maize, beans, wheat and anything else they could lay hands on in sacks or baskets. Many people had quietly come across from Vaideci to take their share. All the barns had been broken into since last night. A servant had told the policeman that the leaseholder’s watchmen themselves were the most active and it was they who had called the people in to pillage. As a matter of fact, it looked as if Oduduie himself had some understanding with the peasants to the effect that he did not mind what they did with the barns and such-like but they must not touch the manor. Now, however, discovering that they wanted to set fire to or at least despoil the manor, he had come over to complain. There were not many peasants there, because everybody took what he wanted and left. But outside the inn there had been some fifty peasants, perhaps even more, either talking or plotting something.

Boiangiu frowned: ‘So the clods won’t leave things alone.’ Nevertheless, he took the way of prudence and decided not to interfere. As long as they were not disorderly, why stir them.

After less than half an hour, a policeman who had been stationed in the yard, rushed into the sergeant’s office, announcing breathlessly: ‘Fire, sir! The manor’s burning!’

Fearfully, the sergeant went outside. True enough, in the direction

of Cosma Buruiană's manor, thick clouds of smoke rolled upwards. He could no longer remain indifferent; to do so would mean to risk a court-martial if it were discovered, and it would certainly be disclosed if the police did nothing when the peasants set a manor on fire. He gave some orders, and got ready, while Didina cried, wringing her hands: 'Silvestru, Silvestru, do be careful they don't kill you!'

Controlling himself, Boianăiu remained calm, making a mental resolve that he would not attempt anything big; just patrol, so as to show authority. He did not want to arouse the peasants, but to quieten them, and would not treat the conflagration as a planned action, but would deal with it as an ordinary fire. Later, after things had settled down, he would change his attitude, and pay back today's rascals.

At the corner of the crossroads near the inn, the road leading to the manor was filled with peasants. The sergeant, marching ahead of the four policemen, approached with slow steps, his face bright and faintly smiling, to show that he had no bad intentions. The peasants remained still, glancing at them indifferently, as at passing strangers. Only when the policemen were a couple of paces off did the crowd make room for them to elbow their way through. Boianăiu enquired jokingly: 'Well lads, aren't you going to let us through?'

'Why should you get through? It's burning all right by itself!' shouted a sarcastic voice.

The sergeant pretended not to grasp the meaning of the words and stopped amidst the peasants.

'I can see, it's burning,' he replied. 'but we have to do our duty. Or maybe you're against that, Serafim, are you?' he added to Serafim Mogoș who stood right in front of him with a dark and determined face.

Mogoș merely shrugged his shoulders without answering. Trifon Guju spoke up in his place: 'And we know our duty towards you! . . . It's easy to beat people up and torture them when you're on top!'

'Well, if one's job makes it necessary, Trifon . . .' Boianăiu said in a conciliatory manner, realizing that the peasants were trying to provoke him.

'Have you ever had a taste of it?' burst out Serafim Mogoș suddenly. 'If not, I'll give you one, you bastard!'

As he spoke, quick as a flash of lightning, he smacked the sergeant on both cheeks. Boianăiu did not even have time to grasp what was going on. In a moment blows were raining on him from everywhere. As if in a dream he felt Trifon Guju seize his rifle from his shoulder, and shrank his head into his chest, his one instinct being to get

away from the crowd. The peasants yelled and struck at him: 'Come on, give him what for!' 'Baste him good and proper!' 'Go on, run!' From behind him came the terrified voices of the policemen: 'Don't hit!' He lowered his head to push his way through. The whole outburst only lasted a few minutes. Despite the shower of blows, he managed to move some distance, and soon felt them lessen in intensity as the crowd thinned, while behind him the struggle went on with the same fury, as if the peasants had not noticed that he had wriggled away.

'Run, go on,' voices jeered around him.

His legs listened to their prompting without his volition, and rapidly covered the ground. Other steps pounded in his wake. He would have liked to see whose they were, but was afraid to look back. The yells continued. Having run thus madly for a few moments, he noticed a gate standing wide open on the right, recognized Marin Stan's dwelling and tore in through the yard towards the garden. In vain the dog, growling angrily, tried to bar his way; only when he was among the trees behind the cottage did he slow his pace and look round. Behind him, with the same desperate speed, came the four policemen, at intervals which indicated the order in which they had escaped from the blows. Like their chief, all four had lost their weapons, and two of them were bareheaded, having left their headgear on the field of battle. Reaching the front of the cottage the victorious peasants paused, booing and cursing, shaking their fists and waving the rifles left in their possession. Somewhat reassured by seeing his men following him, the sergeant turned his back on the vociferous crowd and continued his withdrawal along the gardens at a more normal pace, intending to find some place of refuge for all of them. As he gradually came to himself he kept thinking: 'It's a good thing, the rifles weren't loaded, otherwise the villains would have killed us.'

As the policemen withdrew, tenderly touching their bumps and bruised ribs the peasants, laughing, cursing and swearing, made ribald comments about the struggle. Dancing and waving a rifle in the air, Trifon Guju yelled and whooped with a joy that contrasted ill with his constantly morose expression. 'Now the time has come, friends! Now it's come!'

The news that the policemen had been driven away spread quickly through the village, arousing joy everywhere and lifting a burden from the peasants' hearts. Smaranda's youngest son, who happened to be hanging around the inn, and saw the drubbing they had, rushed home, panting breathlessly as soon as he was in the yard: 'Brother Petrică! Ma! They've driven . . . the policemen . . . the people . . . and beat them up . . . and . . .!'

Petre, who had arrived a long time ago from Lespezi, had not left

the cottage since. He was irritable and sullen, and the taste of bile was in his mouth. He had hardly spoken to his mother and did not even want to eat. Now he muttered sourly: 'They can go to the devil, they were no good to anybody.'

7

It was about six in the evening, when the gipsy newsboys shouted in Bucharest: 'Special edition! . . . New government! . . . Appeal to the country!'

Since Grigore's return from Amara he had dined at the Predeleanu's every evening. It would have been impossible to stay with his Aunt Mariuca, listening to her nonsensical gossip, or to go to restaurants or the club with friends who up till yesterday had been ready to die for the peasantry. They had advocated the idea of dividing the estates, secretly thinking that nothing would happen and taking a pride in appearing to be progressively minded. Today, however, the same people pressed for cannon to wipe out the insurgent villages, and for the peasants there to be whipped till the blood came, all of them, without exception, to serve as an example, so that no peasant should ever dare to raise his head again. Here at Victor's place, especially now when his father was alone and in danger in the country and Grigore unable to assist him, the atmosphere helped him; he and Victor understood each other, as always.

On his way there this evening, he bought every special edition so as to read and comment on them with Victor later. He was not interested in the composition of the government but in the appeal, for it had been rumoured that big reforms were to be announced in it which would immediately put an end to the agitation of the peasants, and do away with the need for suppression by arms.

Before dinner was served, they had time to discuss all the measures outlined in the appeal, but disagreed about them. Predeleanu was of the opinion that the new government had made an excellent début, and that the appeal was an olive branch in the hands of those who would be sent to calm the peasants. Nothing more than this could be promised, especially under the pressure of the disturbances. Grigore, however, felt that to the people in the rebellious villages, the reforms promised in the appeal would seem an empty mockery. The peasants wanted land, they had burnt and committed outrages to become the masters of the soil, and now the new government came and instead of giving them land exempted them from certain taxes, promised to let to them state land, said that the terms of the contracts with the boyars would be eased, and so on;

all things which would have been very useful before the revolt had broken out, but today . . .

'I came back from Amara only a few days ago, and there I felt the pulse of the peasants!' Grigore went on. 'A month or so ago they tried very hard to be allowed to buy Babaroaga; today they don't even think of it. Now they simply demand that all estates should be divided between them. Is it to these people that you want to present, on a plate, exemption from taxes? It's ridiculous.'

'Very well, but in that case force has to be used to quieten them in the first place and then, after they have come to their senses, they will understand the significance of the measures which have been worked out for their own good!' Predeleanu said chéerfully.

'That's right,' Grigore replied. 'We mustn't be hypocrites, after all! The peasants have revolted – now let the army punish them; that's that! Reforms can only be discussed with healthy people, not with sick, hysterical ones. This appeal is just one more hypocrisy, that's why it makes me cross. The revolt cannot be put down without bloodshed. Instead of shooting outright at the rebels, the government first aims in the air with the appeal, so that it can later wash its hands, saying that it did not want bloodshed but . . . It's a cheap manoeuvre, and it will only exasperate the peasants and result in more blood being shed.'

Tecla had forbidden any discussion on the rising or any politics at table. Most of the time they talked about Miron Iuga. Mrs. Predeleanu interrupted: 'When I think that Victor might be alone in the country at this moment, it makes me shudder!'

Grigore glanced at Olga. It was then that Predeleanu enquired: 'By the way, Grigoriță – excuse me if the question is indiscreet or tactless – but I heard that your wife had . . .'

'Ex-wife,' interposed Grigore quickly, reddening.

"Yes, that your ex-wife had gone to the country just at this moment. Is it true? If so, it really is . . .'

'I don't know!' young Iuga muttered, his face darkening. 'As far as I'm concerned, she died long ago.'

8

Bumbu the steward kept old Iuga informed about everything that happened in the village, as he had been instructed. Since the news about Ruginoasa had been received in the morning, boyar Miron had called him several times, always to ask the same questions: 'Well, what other tricks have our people been up to?'

The only fact Bumbu hid from him was the murder of Nadina, for fear that the old man might insist on going over to Lespezi to see

things for himself. When he had enquired about the fate of the lady, Bumbu had answered that no news had come to him, but probably she was not in the village any more. Iuga then exclaimed cheerfully: 'Of course, this is no place for her now! It's a good thing she had that car, so that she could disappear in time, otherwise God knows what outrages she might have suffered at the hands of our people.'

The old man went out alone into the courtyard after dinner as he did every fine evening, for a little exercise before going to bed. The sky was clear, dark purple, and the stars twinkled like drops of dew. The breath of spring lent vigour to his movements. He went round the new villa, walking along the gravel drive, which had recently been cleaned, and towards the gate opening on to the road. Near at hand, in front of him, through the trees and seemingly only a few yards away, he saw the fire consuming Cosma Buruiană's manor, burning quietly, with no huge flames – only a patch of red light on the horizon. It was ten o'clock, the fury of the conflagration and the noise made by the peasants had calmed down. In the quiet of the sunset, they had been audible even at this distance. The village slept as if all the events of the day had been a dream. Only the light of the fire proved their reality. Further away, to the left, another smudge of red lit the sky, marking the fire burning at the Lespezi manor, if not Gliganu as well. Even on the right, towards Ruginoasa, a rosy glow persisted. Everything that was still burning did so quietly with no haste, like embers.

'I would never have thought that my people would be the vilest, that they would be the ones who went everywhere in the neighbourhood, rousing others with their wickedness!' Miron Iuga murmured, pausing for a moment near the gate. 'All my efforts have been wasted on them! It's useless, the peasant is destined to remain a savage until the end of the world.'

He made his way back round the other side of the house, passing the old buildings and entering the big garden at the back where no trees obstructed his view. Bitterness gradually entered into his soul and became more and more oppressive. Up to that morning, in spite of all the rumours, he had been inwardly certain that his villagers would remain quiet, even if all the surrounding villages revolted. He was so closely linked to them by his own life and those of his ancestors that he had found it impossible to believe that they did not share the same family feeling.

'I should have gone to Ruginoasa all the same to reprimand them,' he thought. The idea had bothered him all day, but he had kept pushing it aside. 'The peasants might have thought that I was afraid, and . . .'

He had reached the spot where the garden ended and the field began. The manor lay behind him, the lanterns in the yard twinkling

in the distance with a yellow light like timid candles in a church. He paused and turned to look once more at Buruiană's burning manor. Suddenly his heart constricted painfully; as he gazed, the flames seemed to be consuming his own buildings.

The blood-red patch was burning in the sky, with the Iuga manor outlined against it like charred but still smoking ruins. His thoughts dispersed and others took their place, being wiped out again in their turn.

'It can't be!'

On the left, the flames at Lespezi could be seen more clearly, appearing nearer, as if they had been stoked afresh. Between the two fires, however, old Iuga discerned a new glow on the horizon like a fresh wound, growing and spreading under his very eyes.

'It's Cantacuzu there... So they've started at Captain Grădinaru's as well!' he muttered, attentively examining the tongues of fire, which gradually grew broader.

Turning to the left, in the direction of Babaroaga and Vladuța, he added to himself.

'It seems the colonel has escaped so far...'

Towards Certeasca, further to the left, however, Popescuciocoin's manor was burning and lower down in the Teleorman valley, General Dardălat's place at Humele and Ioniță Rontompan's at Goia.

'Poor Ioniță,' exclaimed Miron. 'They've plundered him, too.'

From where the old man stood, the fire at Goia seemed close to Ruginoasa, but it was much brighter, a sign that it had been more recently started. Others were seen lower down beyond Ruginoasa, possibly at Oredelu or Izvorul. More fires could be seen above the woods of Amara, perhaps at Dumbrăveni...

'Fire and destruction everywhere!' Miron thought, turning his face towards his own manor again having examined the length of the horizon. 'We are like an island.'

The night covered everything. There was no breeze, no sound. In the profound silence which surrounded him, the old man could only hear his own breathing, rough and grating. All around the mute flames flickered, like putrefaction from the sores on a great body crucified on the earth, fouling the whole atmosphere.

As Miron Iuga stood motionless in the dark, he shuddered, as if a sudden wave of cold were passing through him. He turned back, his eyes on his manors, over which the flames writhed, and once again murmured emphatically: 'It can't be!'

Chapter Ten

BLOOD

I

At dawn, on Sunday morning, each peasant in Amara rose with one thought—that his fellows should not outdo him. The more industrious had stayed until far into the night carrying away from the lease-holder's manor all that could be salvaged from the flames. Pavel Iursu had come to blows with Jacob Mitrutoiu, almost killing him, over a bull calf he had begun to lead home when the watchman complained that he himself had had his eye on it for weeks, as Zamfir Chelaru could witness. When the fire had started, everyone had rejoiced—but then they had regretted that it had begun before they had taken away what was useful, especially now that the policemen had been got rid of. What a waste for so many good things to go up in flames! And it was the poorest who had got the least because at the beginning they had not dared to take anything, and when they had dared, there had been nothing left.

No sooner had Ignat Cercei awoken than he lost his temper for his wife prumbled that he had not brought enough. He should have taken a piglet as well. That would really have made the children happy again. Her husband reminded her in vain that he had brought three sacks of maize, which would last them until midsummer, almost breaking his back, which he ached all night, and that now she kept on complaining about a piglet.

"You devil's bitch, how could I possibly have carried away a piglet on my back?" shouted Ignat. "You can't drive a pig from behind, it's not like a man or an ox!"

"Well, how did the others manage it? And people who already had two for Christmas, not like us, who had ours taken by the tax collector, may he rot in hell! Only last night I—I's Iincă told me that the priest's son-in-law had driven three of the lease-holder's piglets into his sty."

Ignat would have agreed that his wife was right if he had not been so angry. As a matter of fact, in his greed for maize, like all poor men who think only of their *mămăligă*, it had not occurred to

him that he could or should take a pig. He retorted furiously: 'The devil's under your hide! Of course, you don't know that the priest lives just opposite the Manor, and Filip only had to cross the road to bring home all the lease-holder's pigs!'

After pottering about in the house and the yard for a time, he took a rope and went straight to the tax collector's place. He knew that Birzotescu and his wife had fled while it was still dark the previous morning, as soon as they had seen the fire at Ruginoasa. They had been so frightened that they had not dared to go along the road, but had kept to the gardens and the fields, both carrying a small bundle on the back. Some villagers had met them, but because of their terror had merely consigned them to the *dévil*. Only a dull-witted girl had been left to look after the things Birzotescu had scraped together since he had moved there, when he had had nothing to his name, so that just to look at him had made one feel sorry for him. Ignat Cercel entered the yard and immediately went to the sty, where three pigs grunted and squealed. The girl had not fed them yet. Taking his time, he let them out, gauged their weight, and choosing the fattest, tied the rope to one of its back legs and started off towards the open gate. The girl, noticing that the usual morning squealing had ceased, came hurriedly out holding a bag of maize. Ignat, without saying a word, snatched it out of her hands and made off, shaking the familiar bag in front of the pigs. The dullard, suddenly coming to herself, began to screech: 'Oh, my Lord! Help! . . . Thieves! . . . They've stolen the pigs! Help!'

Ignat, unheeding, made his way out of the gate, followed by all three pigs. In the middle of the road he threw them a handful of maize, waiting until they had gobbled it up, and then went on. The girl's yells caused a couple of neighbours to come out to see what had happened.

'Oh, so you've taken them, Uncle Ignat, have you?' one of them enquired, with envious friendliness.

'Well, he took mine!' Ignat answered simply, and added with relish! 'Come on there, my boys, come on!'

He arrived home safely, having lost only the rope, which he had left hanging on the pig's leg until it had become untied and dropped off. Entering his yard with the three animals, he proudly said to his wife, holding out the bag: 'There you are - maize and pigs too; but don't you say another word, otherwise I'll use my belt on you, blasted woman!'

For a moment the woman stood with eyes like saucers, then, recovering her senses, she stammered greedily: 'Oh Lord! Holy Mother of Jesus! . . . Come on, my darlings, come on!'

Melinte Heruvimu had got up at daybreak quietly, so as not to wake his wife, who had been convulsing with pain all night. He

plucked a chicken, and put it on to boil. Then he spread the cloth on the table. Ever since Cosma the lease-holder had left he had hung round the manor in case something should happen. He had taken several sacks of maize, but his main concern had been to lay hands on something nice to eat, so that he should be able to treat his wife and children like a boyar – they had starved for so long. He was convinced that the poor woman had become ill and lain in bed for so long only for lack of food, and that if she could eat well for at least a couple of days she would get on to her feet quicker than with any of these mixtures. Seeing that the people were only busy in the barns, he had rushed at Lazăr, the steward, to push him aside and enter the house. Lazăr, who was the stronger, would have got the better of him if others had not come to his assistance, beating the steward soundly, and dispersing into the rooms to wreck and pick up what they wanted to their hearts' desire. Melinte smelt around until he discovered the larder, crammed with good things. He found two baskets there and filled them with jars of preserve, bottles of wine and liqueur, cheeses, a white loaf, sausage, tenderloin, a whole ham, olives and everything he could lay hands on. When he had arrived home dusk had already fallen, and he had not even unpacked the things, but had hidden them inside the entrance, planning to set a table to appear next morning, as in a fairy-tale.

Now, as he emptied the baskets, placing all these delicacies on the white cloth, his worn face shone with happiness. As the first rays of the sun smiled through the grimy windows, he stood back to admire his work, and then turned to the bed where the woman lay. Her great black eyes stared at him in fear. The man, surprised in his action, said smiling, as if excusing himself: 'Oh, I thought you were asleep . . . Look, what lovely things! I brought them all for you! The children can eat anything, as long as it's food. But you must feed yourself up, and with good food, so that you get better. You've been suffering in bed, long enough. I've put a chicken to boil in the saucepan, to make you a good, hot soup, and . . .'

Suddenly he stopped. Her eyes gazed at him steadily, unchanging, with the same look of terror. Her mouth was slightly open, as if she wished to speak.

'Oh, my God, you haven't died, have you?' Melinte muttered, lost.

He approached the bed and touched the withered arm which rested on the wooden bed-frame, the fingers hanging down.

'She's dead,' the man said dully, looking for a long moment into her glazed eyes, which still stared at the table. 'She's died now, just when . . .'

The smallest child rose from the bed at the foot of the dead woman, whimpering and rubbing his eyes. After some moments,

seeing his father, he brightened and stretched out his hands to be picked up. Melinte took him in his arms, and holding him tightly against his breast, unconsciously caressed him; looking again at the woman, as if reluctant to believe. He woke the other two children: 'Come along, you've slept enough! It's time to get up!'

The children stirred drowsily, murmuring. But when they saw the loaded table, they brightened up and remembered their hunger. Melinte seated the three of them on the bench: 'You can eat as much as you like, children; eat till you've had your fill! Only don't fight, and don't make a noise, because mother is dead, and it would be a shameful thing. Paveluș, you are the eldest, see that the soup doesn't boil over. I'm going to call a neighbour to wash her!'

Colonel Ștefănescu leapt out of bed, putting on his dressing gown and slippers, and quickly went outside, bareheaded as he was. The newly risen sun shone straight into his eyes, so that at first, having just risen from sleep, he did not clearly see the crowd of peasants noisily filling the yard. He shouted at random: 'Well, lads, what is it? You've woken me, and pulled me out here in my pants!'

Those standing nearer, who heard his words, burst out laughing. The rest made yet more noise. It was then that he saw that many had come with pitchforks, axes and hoes, as if for battle. The colonel had retained from his military days his courage and daring in the face of danger. He had feared an eventual rising only because of the girls, whom he loved like the apple of his eye, lest these ruffians might outrage them, thus ruining them for the rest of their lives. Now, however, he felt in his element. Unimpressed by the yells of the peasants, he shouted once again, loud enough for all to hear: 'Hey there, hey! Don't make such a hullabaloo if you want us to hear each other! . . . Now, what is it, hey? I see you've come armed – more than a hundred of you – and I'm alone! . . . What is it? What d'you want from me?'

The peasants, who had quietened for a few moments, now burst out again in an infernal chorus: 'Get out! . . . We don't want any agreements! . . . Leave the estate, Colonel, it's ours! . . . Look how he stands there, the old scarecrow! . . . We'll give you a thrashing! . . . You've cheated and skinned us enough! . . . Land! . . . Land! . . . Our labour – our land!'

Old Ștefănescu looked on and listened in an amiable fashion, as if they had been congratulating him. When the hubbub had lessened, he went on: 'How can I understand you if a hundred speak at once?'

After a further quarter of an hour of noise, two peasants were elected to speak for the rest. The colonel nodded in satisfaction:

'That's right, lads! Now I know who I'm talking to . . . Come along, you, Ion! . . . Or maybe you want to speak first, what's your name – I don't remember?'

'I'm Stefan Căligan, sir!' the peasant answered, swelling out his chest.

'Very well . . . Lord bless you, I'd forgotten your name, Fănică,' Ștefănescu cried jovially. 'Now come on, Fănică.'

'Well, what can we say, sir? Don't you know the revolution has come?' asked Căligan proudly.

'I see that it has, but I don't know what the revolution has got to do with me, as for me . . .'

'You know right enough,' exclaimed the second peasant harshly. 'Don't pretend you don't . . . and whether you do or you don't, we want the estate, you've been master of it long enough, it's our turn now! If you give it to us, good enough; if not, we shall take it anyway!'

'Then take it, my lads!' said the colonel, making a gesture with his hands as if he pushed the devil from him. 'What, is it my estate? Dig your ploughs into it, and good luck to you! As for me, well, there it is!'

'You're only saying that now because you're afraid of us, but tomorrow you'll have forgotten what you said!' the peasant retorted. 'You shan't cheat us again, Mr Colonel! We've let you skim off the cream long enough! Now you can pack your bags and clear out; we shan't allow you or any other boyar to set foot on our land, that's flat!'

'And where shall I go, Ion?' asked the old man simply.

'Back where you came from, Mr Colonel!' Ion answered. 'It wasn't us who brought you here, and we didn't ask you to come here either!'

'How can I leave, just like that, tell me? How can I leave my damned earnings? Is such a thing possible, Ion?' the lease-holder protested.

'Yes it is possible! Everything was earned with our work and our sweat!'

'Did I come here naked as you see me now?'

'Oh, don't waste your spit! You should be glad we haven't cursed at you nor beaten you up, like other boyars have been treated; maybe you've heard about it!' the peasant replied, unmoved. 'Go in health, and may we meet again when pigs have wings!'

The colonel, however, would not allow himself to be treated thus. He tried every argument, even going so far as to propose that they should let him join the revolution, so that he should save the capital he had invested in the estate, which was almost the whole of the girls' dowry. The peasants heard him out, even laughing at some

of his jokes, but they found an answer for almost everything and where they had none repeated stubbornly that it was their labour, and that the revolution would not allow boyars to meddle in their affairs.

'We shall get along all right, don't worry,' said Căligan. 'The people with the people, and the boyars with the boyars. You go to the town, that's where the boyars are, and that's your place!'

First of all they said he should walk, only taking as much as he could carry in a bundle on his back. Finally, however, they allowed him to leave in his chaise, and take everything he could put into it. After standing so long, bareheaded, in the cool morning air, the colonel started to sneeze.

'Ha, on top of everything else, I've caught cold!'

'And what about those who got beaten up, or worse – what can they say?' someone shouted.

'You've given me enough of a beating by turning me out into the street, penniless, an old man, with three marriageable daughters!' the colonel exclaimed bitterly.

In the early hours of the morning, Petre began to mend the gate leading into the road, of which only the two posts had remained. It was not such an urgent task; it had been standing thus since his father had died a year and a half ago, and could have stayed longer. But Petre felt he must do something rather than go anywhere along with the others.

Since he had returned from Lespezi he had been thoughtful and sick at heart. His mother had heard with horror from the neighbours what had happened, but he had been reluctant to tell her anything himself. Only when she told him that other people accused him of being responsible for all the trouble did he burst out furiously that those who said so lied, for as God was his witness he had no sin on his soul.

This, in fact, was what he kept repeating to himself, yet he could not still his remorse. He regretted that he had not from the beginning minded his family's business alone, instead of getting mixed up in the move to buy the estate and now to divide the land. The boyars had been quite decent with him, to say nothing of Grigoriță; if the latter had been his father he could not have done more. And in return he had taken it out of the lady Nadina, just like that, because she had offended him by refusing to sell Babaroaga. He out of all of them had felt insulted, the rest had taken it calmly. He had got it into his head last winter, when they went to Bucharest, that he must insult her in return. Since then he had been obsessed by the idea, and had rejoiced when the people had become increasingly heated,

making it easier for his own feelings to burst out. He had not thought beforehand what his revenge would be, as young Dragoş had done with Chirilă Păun, but had merely repeated to himself that he would see what he would do when the time came. And then it seemed to him that over at Lespezi he had suddenly gone mad. He had burst in, intending to strangle her, but only when he had stood in front of her had he realized that he would rather kill himself than her. Nevertheless, Toader Strimbu had murdered her. It had occurred to him to prevent Toader from entering, but he had not done so because he had been ashamed in front of the people, who might have accused him of taking the side of the lady, for some obscure reason. Indeed, while the others had been laying waste to the manor, he had wanted to kill Toader Strimbu for what he had done, the only thing which had checked his fury had been his sense of shame. He had returned from Lespezi alone, leaving the others all round the conflagration. Even Matei Dulmanu had been angered at her death. Petre did not dare to confess, even in his own heart, why the murder of the lady upset him so much. He merely repeated over and over again to himself that he was not guilty, for it had been done without his will, and he had stood aside. Whatever happened, he would not leave his yard, even if it meant that he alone, of all the villagers, went without land. Last night he had dreamt of the lady. He had held her in his arms, but she had not cried out: she had caressed him, murmuring: 'Why did you let them kill me?' and he had awoken with her reproachful voice still sounding in his ears.

Now he chopped and hammersed furiously, wanting to forget or at least to stifle his memories. But however hard he might try, another searing question would burn its way through, torturing his mind.

2

Within two hours after sunrise there was a general ferment throughout Amara, as if the whole place was preparing to move on, like a caravan which had paused long enough in one place.

All the news and rumours met on the space in front of the inn. They were so many and varied that the people continually expected to hear some new event, even more startling than the others, which then began to seem everyday occurrences.

From time to time somebody mentioned boyar Miron, with an enquiring look. Others would change the subject, as if the question frightened them, or as if they did not want to understand. Even Trifon Guju, hoarse from shouting and incessantly bragging about

the tussle with the policemen, which he considered as a personal victory, only muttered and shrugged his shoulders.

Towards noon, however, Anton the madman suddenly appeared, coming up the road sweating, dirty, and more ragged than when he had left a few days before, but with a face filled with pride, as if all the joy in the world were gathered in his person. He instantly began to relate that there was not so much as a smell of a boyar left between Roşiori and Alexandria, where he had been wandering recently. All the manors had been burnt to the ground, so that there was no trace to show where they had stood. He described how the people, young and old, had gathered in the villages and armed themselves, standing on guard to see that the boyars did not return to stop them dividing the land. Some were even preparing to go to Bucharest to rescue the king from where the boyars held him, for it was only they who prevented him from sending word to the people that they had done well in driving the boyars away, urging them to speed the just division of land, and not to tarry in dispensing justice to the poor from all the estates.

The peasants, familiar with the madman's prophecies, made fun of him, some even asking how he had been so lucky as not to be mistaken for a boyar and have his tongue cut short to rid the world of his nonsense. While they were thus engaged, a trustworthy man, Marin Vilcu from Izvorul, appeared. He was taking his child, who was at death's door, in his cart to Costeşti to see the doctor. He stopped at the inn to rest and feed the horses; they had suffered a hard winter, without fodder, and could hardly stand. Marin said that last night he had heard that the king had replaced those boyars who had led the country up to now, because they had not behaved properly towards the people and had not wanted to give them land. He had put in office others who had promised that they would not permit any boyars in the villages, and would divide all the estates among the people, so that everybody should dig in his ploughshare and till his own plot of land. But the boyars whom the king had removed had come to an understanding among themselves, and did not want to listen to his commands: they had agreed with the generals to murder the king and then start out with an army and cannon to get the estates back from the people in those places where they had been taken, shooting everybody who had risen against their boyars. Then the king, to avoid being overcome by the unruly boyars, had secretly sent all the faithful servants he had to tell the peasants to drive away every boyar that remained, so that not one should be left among them, saying that the boyars should not be allowed to take back the estates, and anyone who helped to do so would suffer severe retribution, for these boyars had trodden his edicts underfoot. Those who were nearer to Bucharest must speedily

rise and go there, to assist him against the boyars, for he stood on the side of the people, desiring to deal justly with them, and this was why the boyars were against him.

If Anton had told them all this, they would have been incredulous, but Marin Vilcu was a sober man. And he had hardly left in his cart before another man appeared, from Găujani, and told them exactly the same thing, which he had heard from the mouth of a peasant, riding on horseback, with a silver cross on his breast, who had passed through the village. A little later further confirmation came from a man from Vaideei, who had got it from Mozăceni.

People began to grow anxious. They imagined themselves punished and landless because they had not fulfilled the king's orders. It was true they had not known about them, but now they did. Several voices shouted that they must go to the old boyar and tell him about these instructions, and that he must not stay amongst them any more, because they did not want to incur the king's wrath. Others added that everybody must go; nobody must stay hidden in their homes when times were hard, and then come in a crowd for the reward. Some said that Filip Ilioasă, the priest's son-in-law, for instance, had been quick enough in going to leaseholder Cosma's place and leading home three pigs as large as calves.

'Let's go to the village hall!' Trifon Guju shouted. 'We'll ask the mayor why he hasn't told us about this order from the king.'

They started off with enthusiastic shouts to encourage each other, but found only the clerk Chiriță and an agent from the tax office, who was cringing and fearful, thinking they had come to kill him, as he had often been in the village to collect the taxes last winter. Chiriță, on the other hand, back-chatted with the peasants, so Toader Strimbu knocked him about a bit, which was something he'd been dying to do for a long time.

'You've hit me, Toader, you won't forget it!' Chiriță Dumitrescu threatened, deeply injured in his feelings. 'This was all you lacked after your crime yesterday! Well, let it be! We'll settle accounts, don't you worry!'

'And why shouldn't I hit you, you're no better than a pig, a filthy pig,' Toader retorted, grinning. 'And I'll do it again if you don't dry up!'

That he should be addressed in such a way in front of so many people wounded the clerk more than if he had been hit again. He said no more, turning his back in a superior manner. In fact, the peasant no longer noticed him, for at this moment Mayor Pravilă, hearing that they had burst into the village hall, arrived breathless, pale with fear and whining: 'What's happened to you people? Wasn't it enough for you to take on the boyars, or do you have to

fight the authorities as well? Have you gone mad, or are you on the way?"

Trifon Guju, facing him, shouted: "Why did you keep the king's orders from us, Mr Mayor?"

On hearing the reason for all the trouble, Praviľă said that he had received no orders from anyone since the day before yesterday, when the prefect had left; the mail had not arrived, and there had been something wrong with the telephone since then, either the wires had been cut, or something else had happened. Trifon, as if he were the leading man of the village, then requested in commanding tones that the mayor should send the crier to call everyone to the village hall, after which everybody would go to the old boyar.

"I shall neither send a crier nor go with you myself!" Praviľă answered. "If you've done everything you wanted to do without me, I won't have a hand or meddle in anything you do now! It's your own business how you get out of it! I'm the mayor and I can't act on rumours and fairy-tales!"

"Yes you can, because if you don't you'll suffer for it!" Trifon burst out, raising his fist.

"Are you threatening to strike me, Trifon? D'you want to give me instructions?" asked the mayor, flaming up proudly. "Go on, then, strike me, Trifon!"

Cursing and swearing, Trifon made for him, but the peasants held him back. Much wrangling followed, punctuated by cries and shouts, to which each added his share. All tried to convince the mayor that he should stand with them, not against them, for this was not decent, even going so far as to threaten that he would not get any land. Ion Praviľă, both because of his injured pride at being spoken to thus by a nobody like Trifon, and because of his fear of what should happen if things were to return to what they had been, remained unmoved, declaring that he would rather go without land than be trampled underfoot. Trifon, bridling, exclaimed suddenly: "You've got used to being the boyar's mayor. we need a mayor who is ours; you should realize that things can't go on as they were!"

"Maybe the people will appoint you as their mayor? Well, let them!" Praviľă said mockingly.

Furious, Trifon called the criers, and told them to go from house to house, calling the people to the village hall. Seeing that most of the people were on Trifon's side, the mayor thought it best to hold his peace. Only after the criers had left did he announce that he could have stopped them if he had wanted to, because only he had the right to give orders here.

The peasants remained in the yard waiting for the others to come, making plans, shouting and talking. Each caught anger from the other, cursing and grinding his teeth. They urged each other not to

fear any man once the king had proclaimed himself to be on their side, for the boyars would not dare to oppress them any more. Some said that even if soldiers came, be they ever so many, there was no need to be afraid, for the soldiers, too, were peasants, and would not shoot at the people; rather, catching fire themselves, they might shoot at the other side, and then one would see what the boyars would do. Miron's name was mentioned more and more often; some even cursing him, and Toader Strîmbu's big mouth was heard: 'It's that old thief whose the root of all the trouble! He's the one who's caused all the poverty we've suffered; he's the one who's taught all the others to oppress and starve us! Just wait till I get my hands round his throat, then you'll see how well he'll feel, the sodding bastard!'

Others feared that because of the old boyar all their efforts might be wasted, since he would not willingly part with his estate, and who could take it from him by force?

'But why the hell should we ask for his opinion?' some peasants shouted angrily. 'Is he going to go on giving us orders? Has the revolution come for us to blow his soup, or for him to blow ours?'

'Oh, don't get so worked up about it! I bet his teeth are chattering even now! We'd only have to pull a face at him and, old as he is he'll run so fast, you won't even catch him with greyhounds!' said a thin, beardless youth, provoking a gust of complacent laughter.

The village hall and yard had been filled with people for three hours. The criers, having done the round of the village, had returned, but the people stayed on, waiting for the important villagers. Trifon, as if he were the leader, kept coming out to enquire: Has Luca Talabă come yet? Isn't father Lupu, or Marin Stan, or Filip Ilioasa here yet?

Finally they all came, one by one as if ignorant of the cause, and each in turn shrank from being mixed up in anything.

'But you'll be pushing in when the land is divided!' shouted Toader Strîmbu. 'We know you all right! You wanted to buy Babaroaga with hard cash, and turned your noses up at us poor wretches! The land was all right for you then, but now it's going to be divided among all of us, you are not so keen!'

'Oh, I'm keen enough, Toaderiță, only give me some!' retorted Marin Stan in a lively manner.

'You took what you liked from lease-holder Cosma's place, but now you won't have anything to do with us!' Leonte Orbisor reproached him.

'Did anybody ask me, Leonte? Tell me? Well then . . .' answered Marin, wounded.

'Did anybody ask you to go bargain for Babaroaga? But you ran after it with your tongue hanging out just the same!' Toader retorted.

The discussion became increasingly heated; the crowd was in ferment. They felt that the older men opposed them only because they did not want the poor people to have the land. The more they hesitated, the more attractive seemed the idea of action, lest things should turn out in such a way that when the land was divided those who had none were pushed aside, and those who had some got more, as would have been the case if Babaroaga had been purchased. Words flew thicker and more threatening, and curses grew more numerous. The remarks angered Luca Talabă, who said he was nobody's servant to be spoken to like that. Filip Ilioasa, indignant, wanted to go home, but then somebody mentioned the leaseholder's pigs, and a row broke out. Filip tried to make himself room to pass, but, as if he had unleashed an avalanche of fury, he was suddenly beset on all sides by a shower of hits and buffets, which stopped only when Luca, also becoming nervous, shouted: 'Did you invite us here to beat us up? Is this a decent way to behave?'

'Yes, Uncle Luca!' Trifon Guju retorted, 'baring his teeth.' 'Those who don't understand fair words must understand blows!'

3

'I haven't been in the Chamber for three years, but today I would pay to go in!' Roșu said to Titu Herdelea, as they walked up Metropole Hill. He paused now and then to get his breath, as he was a little chesty. 'I must see the changes on the spot, they are so extraordinary. You know what all this business is actually about? I quarrel with you, and then to pay you out I push off from here, at the top of this hill – which by the grace of God I have climbed – as I say, I push off a huge rock, so that it will roll down, threatening to crush everything on its way, other people's houses as well as yours, and then you will get frightened and be sorry. Then you, seeing that I am so furious, hurriedly come to me and say: "Let's make it up!" and I, clever Dick, shout at the stone to stop it rolling further: "Stop, we've made it up! There's no need for you to destroy any more!"'

The Press Gallery was full today, as were all the others. The atmosphere was like that of a great first night at the theatre. The session announced for three o'clock usually started after four. Today, however, at a quarter to three the new government alone was missing, and Roșu only managed to squeeze himself into a seat by creating a scene. Titu Herdelea was left standing at the back. The deputies' benches were crammed with people, as the members of the Senate had also come to attend the show. Horror rather than gravity was to be seen on all faces. Stan Răcaru, senior reporter on a

recently-founded independent and rather rickety newspaper, was heard to remark loudly, intending, of course, that those in the neighbouring galleries should hear him: 'If the new government is truly democratic, and if it loves the peasants, as it boasted when it was the opposition, it can now issue a decree expropriating the estates, or at least it can announce that one will be issued, and those people down there, all scared stiff at the revolt, would applaud frenziedly, I give you my word!'

'You're joking, Nicu,' the *Universal* reporter remarked, 'but in fact what you say is true enough! I've spoken to a number of deputies and senators who said they would accept any reform, however radical, even expropriation, because there's no other way for them of going back to the country, even after the disturbances have died down.'

'People say a lot of things, but when the danger has passed, they forget even more!' put in an old journalist and former deputy, the possessor of an imposing beard. This sally was rewarded with a burst of hilarity which so delighted him that he continued to chuckle until the end of the session, irritating his neighbours.

Suddenly a general murmur heralded the arrival of the new government. The session opened. The Prime Minister, bent and ancient, with a voice like a disconsolate widow, began a bombastic speech, inserting into every phrase: 'Our dear little country', 'Our little country, so dear', and 'This dear little country of ours', frequently pausing to wipe his tear-stained cheeks, and ending up with 'the erring peasantry', 'energetic measures', and 'the support of every good Rumanian'. His predecessor, the present leader of the opposition, which held a majority in parliament – and as old as he was, but even more stogy and with a white beard, answered him, mumbling similar phrases about 'our dear little country' and promising the new government the conditional support of the old parliament. The new Prime Minister then went, arms outstretched, to the recent office-holder on the rostrum, and they kissed each other on both cheeks. This demonstration of patriotic brotherhood was accompanied by a storm of applause from the deputies, senators and public in the galleries. Many eyes filled with tears, and a tremor shook the hardest of hearts. Only the senior reporter of the independent paper, in the Press Gallery, was unable to restrain himself, remarking: 'These snacking kisses will scald the backs of the peasants!'

At this, Max Streșin, an old reporter of the *Glasul Poporului*, the official paper of the new government, could not control his indignation, and burst out: 'Sir, I cannot permit you to disturb such noble moments with your ribald humour, which is only suited to your Jewish press!'

Stan Răcaru, however, answered coolly: 'Listen here, old chap! You know what you can do with your patriotic indignation? Everybody is well aware precisely how disinterested it is. And I don't know what you've got against the "Jewish press", when you're something of a Jew yourself when you're at home!'

Continuing to mutter indignantly, Streșin took advantage of a fresh wave of applause to leave the Press Gallery in a huff. Meanwhile, down below, the demonstrations of enthusiasm continued, vigorously supported by the public, for after the two leaders had embraced, the members of the new government descended to shake hands with their predecessors and other personalities. Every embrace was accompanied by loud, prolonged cheers and 'applause' – the louder and more prolonged, the more violently the two individuals, embracing each other now, had abused each other up to yesterday.

In this moving atmosphere of harmony, the bills of the new government were passed, accompanied by cheers. Each concerned itself with the restoration of order, and primarily with authorizing the announcement of a state of emergency wherever this was found to be necessary.

'That's it, friends!' Stan Răcaru muttered, his sarcasm being much enjoyed by his cronies. 'Who are you putting this patriotic show on for? After all, we are the masters!'

Roșu, who up to now had not uttered a word, smiled ironically and turned to look at Herdelea. But the young man had disappeared, having caught sight of Eugenia Ionescu and gone out to wait for her. He wanted to tell her that Grigore Iuga, who was leaving with the new prefect, Baloleanu, for Argeș next morning, had pressed him to accompany them, so that he would not be alone in Amara, where God knew what he would find. Although this was no time to be away from the paper, Titu felt himself unable to refuse; if he had gone to enjoy himself previously, he was all the more obliged to go and stand by young Iuga now when he might be useful in one way or another.

Gogu had come upstairs to fetch Eugenia before the session ended, and found Titu at the entrance to the gallery. As they had to wait a few minutes, Gogu took advantage of the opportunity to tell his young friend that a deputy from Pitești had just informed him that things had taken a serious turn in the south of Argeș; but Titu must not say anything about this in front of Eugenia, who had been upset quite enough already. Nothing certain was known yet, because the telephone lines from Pitești to the lower part of the country had been cut two days ago; it was said, however, that even murder had been committed.

'So, my dear Herdelea, you can imagine the state my heart is in!' Gogu exclaimed. 'Nadina among murderous rebels! What can have

happened to her – she might have managed to run away, or the peasants might have got hold of her. Poor father is biting his nails, he's beside himself for not having prevented her leaving. Sick and old as he is, and doting on Nadina like he does. I think it would be the death of him if anything happened to her. Well, the whole thing is a tragedy! God will it that things settle down; I for one never want to hear about estates or peasants again, even if I live to a hundred. I'm quite ready to give Lespezi away to get rid of it. I would not wish my worst enemy to undergo the suffering we have endured these last few days!

Eugenia had been moved by the emotional scene at the session. She advised Titu, with the half-hearted support of Gogu, not to go to the countryside and have things happen to him, like Nadina, especially as the army might have to shoot, and no one knows how much bloodshed there might be. Young Herdelea replied, in the deprecating manner of a hero departing for the wars: 'Oh, madam, I would be no great loss!'

4

As sunset drew near, the crowd at last set off in the direction of the Iuga manor, vociferating noisily as if going to a wedding. The brawling had embittered them still more, and now all of them were angry. The noise they made had attracted the children who came running to gape at them.

'Uncle Cristache, come and leave your bar!' shouted Trifon Guju, who was in the lead, seeing Busuioc in his doorway. Either you're with us or with the others, we must know whether we put your name on the list or not!

'I'm coming, I'm coming, Brother Trifon!' the innkeeper answered, in fear and haste. 'How could I not be, when the whole village is there? You, wife,' he added over his shoulder, 'come and stay here, because I'm going with the people!'

From within the woman's voice was heard, muttering, but Cristea Busuioc mingled in the crowd, wearing a radiant expression suitable to the occasion. He became reassured when he observed some of the leading villagers among the peasants, even including the mayor, Praviță.

'Now this is how it should be!' he exclaimed to those around him. 'If we all stand together, nobody can overcome us!'

Miron Iuga knew of the villagers' meeting and their preparations against him. Isbănescu, who until today had not even lifted his nose out of his ledgers, feeling that as a simple scribe the controversies between the landowner and the villagers did not concern him, was

terrified when Bumbu the steward told him half-seriously that it was precisely he whom the peasants hated most, because he kept the ledgers recording their debts and the terms of their agreements. From that morning onwards as soon as he heard a rumour from the servants or from someone passing through the courtyard he hurried to tell old Miron, always adding that in his opinion advantage should be taken of the hesitation of the peasants to leave Amara while there was time, as resistance would be futile in face of their overheated emotions. Miron Iuga listened, but ignored the advice of his book-keeper. Only when the latter allowed himself the liberty of persisting, did the old man irritably tell him to stick to his books, for his advice could be dispensed with.

'The peasants are coming, Master Miron!' Isbăşescu finally shouted in desperation, bursting into old Iuga's apartment. 'The whole village, master! It's terrible . . . Oh, Lord, oh Lord, why didn't you listen to me?'

'Shut up and keep your head!' said old Iuga calmly. 'Let them come! It's just as well that they do, so that things can be settled!'

Isbăşescu decided to stay near the boyar, then, he said to himself, what happened to the latter would happen to him too; since the people respected the boyar they would do him no harm, and therefore they would leave his book-keeper alone as well.

'What are you going to do, master?' he asked again, looking at old Miron as he was walking up and down, his hands behind his back. 'Aren't you going to meet them! If you don't they might force their way in here!'

Miron Iuga continued to pace the room without answering, muttering disconnectedly to himself. In fact, he did not know how to handle these people who had thrown over all the barriers of authority in a few days and transformed an orderly village community into a maddened herd, pushed hither and thither by primitive instincts just as the wind blew. Of course, the driving out of the police, the incendiarism, the pillaging and the debauchery of the last few days had only been the inevitable result of a series of retreats on the part of the authorities, called forth by the inefficiency of the administration and systematic demoralisation, which was the result of the false promises of the demagogues; encouraging first of all the appearance and then the development of a spirit of dissatisfaction and finally chaos in the soul of the simple peasant. Anarchic tendencies had to be curbed, at the very beginning, in embryo, then energetic persuasion was sufficient. But after they had taken root and begun to show above the earth, their destructive power could only be stopped by brute force. He was well aware that now, alone, he could not fight the multitude who had lost their reason, nor could he fail to do his duty, which was to defend his land. His mere

presence and personal prestige was a barrier against complete anarchy. The peasant had an instinctive respect for old and leading villagers, and all the more for those who had been their masters down through generations. As long as he were present, the people would shrink from pillage and plunder. They had set fire to Ruginoasa because he had not been there. Naturally, after Cosma Buruiană's manor had been set fire to, he had considered whether he should not withdraw until the authorities intervened to bring the lunatics back to their senses. Would it not be madness on his part too to face a mob of rebels who had lost their sense of judgment, with no other weapon than the fear and shame which his personal presence would inspire? The moment the dam of respect broke down, would not his presence be seen as a very mockery, provoking an even more violent outburst of fury? Here he suddenly interrupted his own questions, for they seemed to him the first symptoms of cowardice. Only cowardice sought arguments and considerations to justify itself. What was ordained would come to pass in its own time.

As he paced to and fro, Miron heard voices outside, telling him that the decisive moment had come. Isbăşescu stood near the window, gazing out in terror and uttering exclamations of horror. Miron told himself that he should go out to meet them, but kept putting it off, as if every minute of delay was to his advantage.

Outside, the sound of steps and voices grew louder. The crowd flooded from the road into the courtyard of the Manor, like a river which had suddenly changed its course, rushing up the newly-sanded drive, but being careful not to tread on the tender new grass at the edge. Now and then an admonishing voice was raised: 'Be careful, lads, don't step on the grass, it would be a waste of good work!'

They were less noisy now, as if they were ashamed at having entered the grounds, where the peasants were not allowed to go. Only near the flower-bed before the villa did Trifon Guju dare to let out a deep, prolonged whoop, as if to test his own courage and break the spell which bound them all.

Most of those who had entered the other way, through the yard, were noisier. The doves rose into the air in front of them, and the poultry scattered, clucking frantically. Servants and labourers of all kinds appeared from stables and outhouses, gazing with round, child-like eyes at the arrivals from the village; laughing and bandying wisecracks as if the crowd had arrived with fiddlers for a festivity. Only old Ichim stood amazed and confounded. Bumbu the steward, looking resigned, his knees shaking under him, stood near the entrance to his cottage at the back, while his wife trembled within, peering from behind the curtains.

'Have you come, have you come?' asked the steward stupidly when those at the head of the crowd reached him.

On hearing that others had entered by the drive, he went there, as if angered and seeking to clear them out. The inner courtyard, between the villa and the old manor, was full of peasants. The steward, even more dazed, dropped a kind word to some of the peasants and posted himself in front of the pillars of the porch as if to stop the people bursting in on his master. He wore a fixed smile to conceal his fear and win the good-will of the crowd.

The hubbub swelled as the villagers continued to gather. Some remarks, when he understood them, stung the feelings of the steward, who said naively: 'What is it, lads, what do you want? Tell me, because I . . .'

He was answered by jeering, and his words were drowned in booing. Bumbu was at a loss. Lupu Chirişoiu, being pushed in front of him, shouted: 'Go on, man, go and tell the boyar to come out, because the whole village is here!'

'I'm going, I'm going!' Bumbu muttered, coming to his senses and rushing into the house.

He knocked on old Miron's door, and entered without waiting for an answer.

'Please, master, the villagers have come!'

Miron Iuga turned as if surprised, although a couple of moments before he had heard the rising murmur of the people. For a moment he gazed into the steward's eyes: 'Very well, I conte! Let's go and see what they want!'

He took up the small *căciulă* which he habitually wore in the courtyard, set it firmly on his head, and went towards the door. Bumbu held him back, snatching from a stand nearby a furlined leather jacket and holding it out for him to put on, submitting humbly: 'It's a bit chilly, master, and you might catch a cold if . . .'

'Why in hell did you bring me back?' growled Miron superstitiously, returning nevertheless, and fastening the jacket deliberately as if setting out on a long journey.

Isbăşescu had continued to stand like a stone in front of the window, not even stirring when the steward entered. Seeing the boyar's preparations, he was inspired to stay where he was, thus being prudently prepared for any eventuality. Why should he uselessly expose himself? After all he was just a poor man put into the tragic position of being hated by people equally poor and oppressed. When Leonte Bumbu, from behind Miron, enquired soundlessly: 'Aren't you coming?' the book-keeper answered, in a similar manner: 'No!'

Old Iuga's appearance on the porch suddenly cut all voices short. Several *căciulă*s and hats were lifted instinctively. The old man

paused on the verge of the porch, level with the people. He observed with one glance that the crowd of peasants had completely surrounded the manor, and stretched as far as the villa, filling the servants' yard. The sun, sinking to its setting behind the cottages, threw the porch into shade, casting a bloody glare on the hundreds of faces, which were screwed up into grimaces in the strong light.

'So, I see the whole village is here, dogs and piglets too!' said Miron calmly, searching the faces as if wanting to see who was missing.

'Well, master!' answered several hesitant voices, among which old Iuga recognized that of Ignat Cercel, even momentarily glimpsing his complaining face somewhere in the crowd. But he was not really interested – the face was only a flash in his consciousness.

There was silence for a few moments, which seemed endless to all of them. Then Miron Iuga suddenly shouted authoritatively: 'Who called you here to mess up my seed-rows and the flower-beds and the paths, on which I have worked so hard with the people? Who gave you permission to do this? Why couldn't you wait in the courtyard beyond? That's not good enough for you now, is it? You've become a lot of boyars since you started this revolt and done all those damnable things!'

As he spoke, his fury mounted, and he was unable to control himself any more, although he realized that he was going too far, causing precisely the contrary effect to what he desired. Sure enough, a voice interrupted him impudently.

'Have we come for you to tell us off, or for us to tell you off?'

Miron Iuga hesitated for a fraction of a second, undecided whether to take note of this or not, and then continued in the same tone: 'This taking on the airs of boyars doesn't work with me, lads! I labour like you, and with you, so that we could talk over things there as we always do, not here, which is a place for leisure . . . But all right, now that you've come, let me hear what's troubling you.'

Trifon Guju came to the fore arrogantly, his *căciulă* on the back of his head.

'Those times have gone, master . . . Haven't you heard the king's orders, or don't you want to?'

By a supreme effort, old Miron managed to refrain from answering by striking him in the face. He knew Trifon as lazy and vicious, one of those peasants whom he did not even bother to address. As if he had not heard him, he turned his head enquiringly to the others to find out what orders were referred to. In fact Isbăşescu had told him yesterday, but he thought it better to pretend ignorance. A number of decent people hastily explained how and what they had learned. The boyar listened calmly, and was preparing to speak, but Trifon Guju again interrupted more aggressively, angry

because Miron had not asked him for the information: 'Wait, master, I'll explain, they're stupid and . . .'

'I don't speak to impudent fellows with no decency,' said old Miron, looking him up and down with disgust, and continuing to the others: 'Come on, Profire, so . . .?'

As he listened to the confused explanations, Miron Iuga felt the blood mounting to his face. Trifon's boldness infuriated him, however much he tried to control himself, realizing as he did that the ruffian was deliberately seeking to make him lose his temper, and thus encourage the rest. At the same time, Trifon Guju felt humiliated because the boyar did not allow him to explain, although it was he who had done most to get the people together and bring them there. As there were many who sided with him, murmuring that it wasn't right for the boyar to snub him and that he should be allowed to speak, Trifon's breast swelled with rage.

Finally old Iuga, unable to listen any longer to the stammerings about the king's orders, cut them short with a movement of his hands, facing the people, who had begun to shout.

'How can you let yourself be led by such fairy-tales, my lads? And burst in, trampling on my garden and ruining it? Adult, sensible people, coming here pellmell: do you think you can frighten me, or what? You should be ashamed of yourselves! Especially those of you who used to be decent people, and whom I respected! Look, the mayor of the village! Very nice, I must say! Instead of calming those madmen who have no judgment, you join them in rebellion . . . What a mayor!'

'Forgive us master; if the village took us, what else could we do?' muttered Pravilă, bowing humbly.

'And you, Luca!' Miron went on, more and more heatedly. 'And an old man like you Lupu, with white hair, older than I am, among half-wits like Trifon! Ah, you disgust me!'

All the time he spoke, he was aware that he had lost his temper, but was unable to restrain himself any more than a runner who has mistakenly taken a fatal path, and is carried irresistibly downwards, although he knows that he approaches a precipice. Moreover, the effect of his reproaches encouraged him to proceed. The mob of peasants fell more silent as his voice whipped them more harshly. It seemed as if their instinctive fear and submission had suddenly been revived; they nodded, muttering monosyllabic excuses.

As old Miron's words lashed threateningly over the heads of the surprised crowd like the whip of a lion-tamer, ready to change direction at any moment, Trifon Guju, wriggling as if his body was held in an iron grip, burst out in smothered tones: 'Wait a minute, sir; we didn't rise just for the fun of it . . .'

His words mingled and clashed in the air with the voice of old

Miron Iuga. For a moment the latter choked in surprise, but then immediately went on in increased fury, which threatened to consume every obstacle: 'You shut up, you wretch . . . Shut up, you thief! Shut up! . . . Shut up! . . .'

His eyes bursting from his head, and saliva foaming thinly in the corners of his mouth, Miron Iuga raged at Trifon Guju, shaking his fist. The peasant, after a moment's hesitation, met his look with an arrogant smirk, and, as the boyar did not cease to say 'shut up', although he was hardly able to gasp, for exhaustion, Trifon shouted in a deep, contemptuous voice: 'Why should I shut up? Well, I don't want to shut up! . . . You're not going to give me orders! Am I your servant?'

Miron Iuga, now blind with rage, nevertheless felt every word striking his face with such force that his ears rang. He continued, still beside himself: 'Shut up! . . . Get out of my yard this instant! Get out, you wretch! Now get out, you thief, otherwise I'll . . .'

Trifon Guju, straddling his legs apart as if to root himself on his spot, answered with even more arrogance and anger: 'Well, I'm not going, so there! I don't feel like it! And anyway, it's not your yard any more, and I'd rather stay here, see!'

'You're not going? . . . From my yard? . . . You stand there and . . . Well, then I'll teach you to behave, you villain!'

Old Iuga's voice had changed to a quieter tone. He went quickly back into the house, telling himself at every step that he must be calm. His hands and knees shook, and his heart hammered deafeningly in his ears. In his bedroom his shotgun hung always loaded over his head. He tore it from the wall.

Outside, all the tongues loosened. Luca Talabă alone shouted across to Trifon Guju that it was not a good thing to cheek the old boyar. From all other sides, however, loud approval was expressed: 'Well done, Trifonică! . . . Don't let yourself be . . . Why should the old boyar walk over him and insult him: . . . You should have taken him by the throat and . . .'

A thin voice from some distance away made those around laugh: 'Daddy Miron's white hot with rage, bless him!'

Ignat Cercel, however, was concerned: 'Look out, Trifon, you never know with the old boyar, he might . . .'

When Miron Iuga reappeared, holding the gun, his eyes bulging and bloodshot, he was greeted by a murmur of amazement and disapproval. The old man paused some three paces from Trifon Guju, in his former place, and without shouting said in a clear, deep, energetic voice: 'Get out instantly, you thief! If you don't, you'll be carried out on a stretcher!'

'Now listen here, boyar, I don't want to go! You understand?'

Trifon yelled, infuriated. 'Don't you try to . . . You'll see what happens, boyar or no boyar! After all -'

He was unable to finish his sentence. Iuga had raised the gun after his first words, setting it to his eye. Two reports rang out, following one upon the other so quickly that the second seemed to be the echo of the first. Trifon Guju's face, with its wide open mouth, received the shots, the skin suddenly becoming pitted as with smallpox. His little eyes filled with amazement, and he dropped like a heavy sack.

'You thief!' Miron Iuga muttered, swelling with satisfaction at seeing him slump down.

On hearing the shots, several men who stood near Trifon shrank back upon those behind, shielding their faces in terror. Shouts were heard in the general confusion. Alongside the frightened voices, however, curses and threats burst out. Toader Strimbu, who stood some yards off, suddenly yelled, his face purple with hatred: 'What's this, boyar? D'you want to kill us?'

Simultaneously the crowd began to move. Those around Trifon bent over to raise him. A sudden madness made the people rush now here, now there. As Toader Strimbu hurled his question, a cudgel, shaped like the fist of a child, rose into the air next to Miron Iuga. It struck him on the skull with such force that the crack could be heard. The boyar's small *căcrulă* folded in the top.

'You thief, how can you dare to . . .' Miron began, but could not finish. Scores of other sticks waved in a furious throng competing to get at him. Old Iuga, unconscious, his skull broken, still stood in the midst of the peasants, who by crowding to hit him prevented him from falling.

The open porch, with its square pillars, now filled with people all striking out to the right and left blindly, as if even the air held an enemy. The window-panes rang reverberatingly and fell in fragments. The crowd rippled like a pool stirred by a great storm, waving to and fro as if seeking to discharge as soon as possible the fury which choked it. Their many-toned shouts crossed with filthy curses to make a prolonged howl, drowning the desperate cries of the few maids who worked at the manor. In this outburst of fury, let loose in a single moment like a flash of lightning, long stored among the clouds, and then striking the earth without the usual thunder, the peasants overwhelmed the servants as well. Bumbu the steward, although he had been standing next to the old boyar, managed to get away with a buffeting, as if nobody had recognized him in the climax of the storm.

After a few moments those who had crowded round old Iuga left one by one, calming down or hungry for more action. Without the support of the peasants, Miron Iuga fell face downwards, burying

his face in the soil as though smelling its bitter sweet aroma more avidly than ever before, and for the last time. Nobody heeded him any more. The peasants, continually pushing each other, stepped on his body, trampling him underfoot, pressing him and kneading him into that earth in which he had sunk his roots throughout his lifetime.

5

'Petrică, come quickly – the people have killed the old boyar!' cried Marioara, bursting into the yard. 'Come on, Petrică, hurry up, before they start doing something worse!'

Petre Petre had finished the gate, and was hammering in the cattle-shed behind the house, to keep himself employed so that he would not be drawn into anything. He had heard from Smaranda, his mother, that the whole village had gone to the big boyar's manor, and for a moment had been tempted to go too, not to lay waste or make trouble, but just the contrary, to hold back people of Toader Strîmbu's type. But he had stubbornly stayed at home to nurse the misery in his heart, thinking moreover that the people would not dare to lay hands on boyar Miron, even if they had gone in a spirit of revolt.

'My God, have they?' Petre exclaimed, stunned.

He did not even look at Marioara, although he loved her, and had planned to hold their wedding after Easter. Now she seemed like an unknown person. He felt indifferent to her. Her voice sounded strange in his ears, as it never had before.

Without speaking, he stopped hammering and set off, almost running. Marioara followed like an obedient little dog, breathlessly telling him about events at the manor. Her words seemed to push him from behind, but he kept telling himself that it was useless going alone, he could not fight the whole village, nor stop the people venting their rage.

The buzz of noise round the Iuga manor could be heard far off. Petre quickened his steps. He was just as he had left his work, in his shirt-sleeves and still carrying the axe, as if he were going for a walk with a stick.

In the big courtyard of the manor, people rushed madly to and fro, dazed and flushed, talking noisily and uncertain what to do. Some wrangled with the servants, others fell to quarrelling among themselves for nothing, ready to fight. Near the well, several peasants tended Trifon Guju, who lay groaning. Petre glanced at them, but did not stop. At Ieonte Bumbu's door, more peasants were pushing and shouting threats, the voice of the steward's wife shrieking within

rising louder than all. Next door, in the office, others broke everything they could lay hands on, especially swarming around the ledgers, where all the agreements and debts were recorded.

Petre went into the other yard. Between the two buildings the crowd was even thicker, milling around on the same spot as if awaiting an order, or some sign.

'Where's the old boyar?' Petre asked a group of raging peasants.

'They've just taken him in,' a voice answered him.

As if he were coming from another world, Petre neither recognized the man who answered nor the others who stood by. He entered the old manor. In the porch, the crowd thinned. The broken windows gaped like black mouths in the walls. People came and went through the doors, which stood wide open, as if it were the mill. In the third room stood a few silent peasants, heads bared. In this room Miron Iuga had paced, hands behind his back, a short time ago. Now he lay stretched out, his arms crossed on his breast, on a divan between the windows. His clothes were soiled with the earth, and his face seemed to wear a mask of clay. Old Ichim had gathered him up from under the feet of the peasants. Profira the cook had lain a white sheet on the divan and lit a candle at his head, the flame of which now flickered between the broken windows. She was trying to clean what earth she could from the clothes and face of the dead man. Mayor Praviță, who was among those in the room, said in a low voice: 'Woman, let him be at peace, as God willed it . . .'

He wanted to say until an investigation established the circumstances of Miron's death, but he did not dare.

Petre cast a long look at the muddled face of the old boyar, and observed on the left cheek a streak of congealed blood, mixed with earth, like a black velvet ribbon streaming out from under the flattened *căciulă*. He started on hearing the mayor say with a hint of hidden reproach:

'I suppose you were not here, Petrică?'

'I'm glad I wasn't, God forgive me!' the young man muttered. 'Only the Lord knows what will come of all this!'

'Well, that's how our fate was written, that we . . .'

Once again Praviță was afraid to complete his sentence. Ichim took him up saying: 'You go, Petrică, boy, perhaps they'll listen to you. Don't let them plunder and ruin everything. They've done enough harm already! That's why I sent Marioara for you . . . Now come on, the boyars were good to you and helped you when you were in trouble!'

Petre muttered, his face darkening: 'They helped a good many, and now see what they get in return!'

'God rest his soul, he was rather a hard man, and quick to anger!' Luca Talabă said gently.

They were quiet for some time, then Petre, suddenly coming to himself, said harshly: 'Those who have nothing to do in here should leave!'

He did not wait to see if they would obey him; he was certain they would. Soon the dead man was left with Ichim, Profira and Marioara to watch over him.

In the same firm voice Petre gathered round him all the peasants who had been scattered through the house. Reaching the porch, he met another crowd, who did not want to go away empty-handed. His anger rose: 'Have you no decency? Don't you know there's a dead man in the house? Isn't it enough that you've killed him; now don't you want even to let him rest in peace?'

As they withdrew, grumbling, Petre noticed others struggling to get into the villa, the doors of which had been wrenched off the hinges. It flashed through his mind that this was the property of Grigoriță, to whom he owed only gratitude. He rushed over, shouting in horror: 'Don't wreck everything! . . . Make way, lads! . . . Get out of my way! . . . Don't go in, there's nothing to take! . . . Uncle Serafim, have more sense!'

He elbowed his way through and entered the villa. In the big hall, on the ground floor, people were walking about shyly, touching various objects and talking in low tones. Petre cried out again, appealing to their better selves rather than commanding: 'Get out, lads! Get out, there's nothing for you here!'

He heard footsteps above, and rushed up the oaken steps. People were searching the rooms, which lay open, for things they could take. A woman, gathering odd bits of clothing in a sheet, mumbled whiningly meanwhile: why should she leave all these things to be wasted, instead of being used by her, who was so poor? Petre burst into one room where he saw a crowd, still repeating the same words: 'Get out, my friends, it's . . .'

It was Nadina's bedroom, with the great bed and the big photograph hanging over its head. Petre managed to push his way near the bed, and suddenly saw Nadina's eyes. He started back as if it had really been her, and his voice dried in his throat, only his burning lips moved soundlessly. Almost nude, she looked straight at him, with a languid gaze, holding a tinge of hurtful contempt. Other people looked along with him, and did not dare to open their mouths in her presence. At first, the heart of the young man was filled with joy, as if he had found something he had been seeking in vain. But the next moment the veil fell from his eyes; the contempt in her glance made his heart turn over and become venomous. He felt cheated, as if he had received a smack in the face. Suddenly he burst out hoarsely: 'Look at the she-devil, how she mocks us!'

Only then did he realize that he had the axe in his hand. Whirling

it above his head, he leapt on the bed and hit out with all his strength. The glass shattered with a prolonged and piercing screech, its fragments spraying out like drops of blood from a wound. Several flew into his face, scratching him like the claws of a cat. Petre struck rapidly, panting greedily, and Nadina's mutilated body was transformed into pieces of cardboard, but her eyes remained, languidly contemptuous, even after her body had crumpled into nothing.

'Come on, lads, don't stay staring!' Petre raged, his eyes blood-shot with fury.

The people seemed to have been waiting for this signal for them to burst out. Within a few moments they had smashed everything in the room. The windows were removed by the hinges and out through the space flew the legs of broken chairs, pieces of clothing, chamber-pots, slashed pillows with their feathers floating out, and picture-frames . . .

'Follow me, brothers!' Petre shouted some moments later.

In the other rooms and down below, everyone was smashing things furiously. Petre ran waving his axe like one possessed.

'Fire! . . . Fire! . . . Let only dust and ashes be left!' he cried to those coming from outside, as he made his way down to the ground floor again.

'Set fire to it, brothers!' some repeated, but still fussing around where they were.

'That's how I like to see it, Petrică!' said Serafim Mogoș, observing the blunted axe, 'We've suffered all the injustices long enough!'

Petre found himself outside. The sun had sunk behind the old manor. As dusk prepared the evening for darkness, the people seemed ever more hurried and angered. The young man's face shone with sweat and bitterness.

'What is it, Petrică?' asked Mayor Pravilă, seeing him so changed.

'Can't you see, or don't you want to?' Petre said viciously.

'What a disgrace it all is . . . ' said Lupu Chirițoiu, in reproof and sorrow, standing next to him.

Petre did not leave him time to finish.

'Shut your gob, you old creep-ass! You bullied us enough, holding us back with your tales and whimpering!'

'Oh Lord, you've gone mad as well!' muttered the old man, crossing himself. 'I hope you won't be sorry for it later on!'

'Why should I? After all, we all die once!' Petre shouted, leaving hurriedly without knowing where he was going.

Wisps of smoke began to waft out of several windows in the villa.

'Fire! Fire!' a voice screamed in savage ecstasy.

The conflagration spread with difficulty, burning smokily and only inside the building. It was not until after nightfall that great flames

burst through the roof like a bright crown, releasing millions of sparks. The people continued to stand around the fire, as if they needed no sleep and had no homes to go to. They were all hoarse with raving, but nevertheless continued to shout disconnected words and curses, as if they would buy back all their years of silence.

Behind the flaming villa the old manor stood, black and drowsy. When the people looked in that direction, they shuddered involuntarily. Ignat Cercel alone, in an effort to warm his heart, muttered: 'Well, now the Lord has blessed him with land and everything else!'

Chapter Eleven

PETRE PETRE

I

All Friday night the sky of Amara was crimson with the flames consuming the Iuga villa. The fierce, turbulent crowd of peasants would not go away, sleep was impossible for them. Frantically exultant whoops and shouts drowned the crackling of the flames. In the red light, the people swarmed like restless ghosts, their harsh, cracked voices merging into a strange noise which seemed to come up from the bowels of the earth. Soon after midnight the roof, with its charred rafters, crashed in on the upper-floor ceiling. An enormous cloud of sparks spurted out and scattered in the crimson air, followed by a host of fresh flames that wrenched themselves from the heap of burning embers. As at a supreme command, a prolonged cry of satisfaction burst forth from hundreds of throats. Then, as if they had only been awaiting this sign of complete victory, the peasants dispersed little by little. Only a few stubbornly stayed on, afraid that something might happen which they would miss. Towards daybreak the courtyard became calmer and the fire itself burned more quietly, as if replete, with languid flickerings.

In the window of the old manor the same timid light was still watching. The big sparks danced waywardly over the roof and went out when they touched the old tiles, as if falling on ice. Ichim had fastened the porch doors against anyone who might enter and trouble the peace of the house. For a while he sat and watched by the side of the murdered boyar, then the cook took his place, then the steward, and then the cook's husband. And now Marioara had been nodding for about an hour in the corner armchair. She felt sleepy, but more than this she was afraid. She never looked at the divan on which Miron Iuga lay dead, she was frightened enough by the shadows moving restlessly on the walls like unappeased ghosts. The chill that crept through the broken window-panes became keener. Once or twice, just as her eyes were closing, she thought she could hear a strange rustling. Only once did she dare to steal a glance towards the spot whence the noise came. As the candle

flickered, the dead man seemed to stir. She crossed herself quickly three times, and pulled herself together a little, but just then she suddenly heard a distinct, heavy, painful sigh, like a groan. In her dread she could not even utter a sound, but leapt to her feet. At the same instant a frightened voice whispered: 'Marioara, don't scream or I am done for! . . . It's me, Isbăşescu!'

The book-keeper crawled out laboriously from under the divan, quite numbed. He had hidden there when he saw old Miron take down his rifle, for he could foresee what was going to happen. As he had lain squeezed underneath, he had thanked God for sending him the salutary idea, otherwise the brutes would surely have butchered him. At first he had been afraid that the peasants would set the house on fire and burn him like a mouse. He had decided not to move before he felt that every danger was past, even if he had to lie there for a week. Then, what with his bowels urging him fast and the dead man driving him mad with fear, he had thought it would be wiser to take to his heels, especially when he had seen Marioara come in to watch the dead, for he put great faith in the girl.

Now he hid behind the curtain, for fear someone might see him from outside, and through it asked Marioara to tell him every detail of what had happened. On hearing that the peasants had beaten both Leonte Bunibu and his wife and looted their house, he thought that they would surely have flayed him alive. The girl also told him that he could safely go through the garden, as there were hardly any peasants left in the courtyard. Then a new idea flashed through his mind: only in peasant's clothing would he avoid the risk of being recognized in the few villages he had to go through on his way to Costeşti. So he sent Marioara to ask her uncle for an outfit however ragged, and bring it in by the back door, so that nobody would see her, promising her a good reward and his everlasting gratitude. The clothes were brought by Profira herself, who exchanged them for Isbăşescu's town clothes, in case the book-keeper should not come back.

'Aunt Profira, may God reward you for your good deed, for saving my life,' he said with tears in his eyes, squeezing her hands. 'I'll never forget you.'

At about daybreak Isbăşescu was making his way through the garden towards Birlogu, without seeing the Iuga villa in flames and without looking back.

Then, a little before sunrise, the roof of the upper floor, which had already been turned into a mass of burning embers, crashed with a rumbling, cracking noise over the ground-floor roof, which also crashed, being itself charred and weakened. Within the blackened walls, through the hollows of the windows, one could see seething flames, with angry wreaths of rising sparks.

Soon the peasants began to gather again, one by one. They stared

at the fire, shook their heads, uttered a word or two and quickly turned their eyes towards the old manor. They felt, and one of them voiced the feeling, that their job was not fully done so long as the old boyar's mansion was still standing. But on account of the dead man nobody dared approach it, however much they yearned to do so. As a matter of fact most of them had come to loot. The poorer ones especially coveted the maize. A barnful of seed had been emptied the previous evening, but there were two more with grain left in them. Pavel Tuasu brought an iron crowbar with him, and managed to come out first with a full sack on his back, taking it to old Ioana, his mother-in-law nearby, who was busy with her chickens and her darling grandson, Costică.

'Come on, mother, don't hang behind, come and take some maize too, for the people are swarming there like an almsgiving day and later on there won't be anything left!' called out Pavel volubly, hurrying back to the manor.

'The devil take you!' grumbled the old woman, going about her business as if she had neither heard nor seen him.

While the crowd jostled around the barns, other more daring peasants squabbled over the cattle. Marin Stan drove a pair of oxen out of the stable and prepared to lead them home. Leonte Orbișor, indignant, bawled: 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself for taking oxen, you've already got a pair and you don't need them; I've never been able to earn enough to buy some and I've got nothing to till the land with! . . . Leave the oxen alone, Marin; I'm ready to commit murder, man, if you don't let them be!'

'So that's justice! Those who already have something take the best part and we have to whistle to make good the loss,' threatened another.

'I don't know anything about that!' said Marin Stan furiously. 'There's no bargaining here, this is no market. Whoever gets hold of something is the owner!'

Leonte Orbișor grabbed Stan by his shirt, and they struggled for a moment, swearing all the while. Then Marin, sensing that all were against him, began to give way: 'Well, we'll talk about it another time, if that's how things are! . . . Never mind, Leonte, you'll find your way to my mill again!'

'Why didn't you think of the horses, you fortune-grabber, you've got none and they'd suit you!' shouted Orbișor jeeringly. 'What do you say, Uncle Ichim?'

At the stable door nearby, Ichim, a pitchfork in his hand, retorted: 'Nobody'll lay hands on my horses, as long as I live!'

'Have a care, Uncle Ichim, we'll set fire to you, too, see how well the villa's burning!' muttered a voice.

'Better that than be a butt for your gibes,' said the old coachman proudly, as if he were the boyar.

The peasants didn't want to measure themselves against Ichim, because he was old and because they knew him for a queer customer, although all of them thought they had the right to whatever they pleased or could get hold of. Was it not with their labour that the boyar had made a fortune, so that by rights it should be divided among them? One of them even accused Ichim angrily: 'It's no good your trying to get hold of what is ours by right, Uncle Ichim, because we'll not put up with it! We didn't put up with the big boyar, how do you expect us to bear with you! . . . Just you wait till Petrică comes and then you'll see!'

Petre, however, was sleeping soundly. He had come home late, and weary as never before. Throwing himself on the bed in his clothes, he had put his fur cap under his head and fallen asleep like a log. All the household had got up but he had not stirred. As he had never been known to lie abed after sunrise, Smaranda had tried to wake him. With his eyes closed Petre had muttered: 'Leave me alone, mother, let me rest a little longer, I'm so sleepy!'

'Sleep, my boy, sleep!' said the woman. 'Better sleep all day than go again where you've been!'

2

'We've left on time!' remarked Titu Herdelea, looking at his watch and seeing that at half-past nine precisely the train had begun to move.

'If only we get there all right!' Grigore Iuga said, controlling his feelings with difficulty.

Baloleanu, his head out of the window, was waving a silk handkerchief and murmuring repeatedly in a choked voice: 'Goodbye, Melanie! . . . Goodbye! . . . Goodbye!'

When the train had left the station he sat down, his eyes moist with tears. He smiled, however: 'My poor little one! . . . She's terribly anxious . . . Indeed, I do believe there's reason enough, although I did my best to convince her there's no danger. If the chief hadn't insisted, I'd never have accepted such a heartbreaking task! Upon my honour, I never would have accepted! . . . Poor Melanie, how she was crying! Enough to break your heart.'

The train was made up of only a few carriages and even these were almost empty. Apart from a few newly-appointed prefects, only a smattering of officers and merchants had the courage to leave Bucharest. The engine driver had received instructions to go ahead with the utmost caution, as a rumour had been heard that the peasants intended to remove the rails and stop the trains in order to delay the arrival of troops in the insurgent regions.

Titu Herdelea alone maintained his calm. He was firmly convinced that all the news about the peasant riots was grossly exaggerated. He had found that in Rumania people knew only two extremities, comedy or tragedy, both equally noisy and fickle. It was so with this uprising; at first everybody had considered it a diversion fabricated by party politicians, an ingenious means of overthrowing the government, and now everybody was desperate and predicted the ruin of the country.

Grigore Iuga was even more anxious than Baloleanu. Last night, at the Predeleanus' he had been advised not to risk his life uselessly until the country had been quieted. Nobody knew exactly what was happening in the country. Whether he went or stayed in Bucharest, he could no longer be of any use to old Iuga. And the supreme argument had been stated in a hushed voice: what if the soldiers should refuse to fire, and go over to the peasants? It was just this argument that made him obstinately wish to leave. Perhaps he would have changed his mind, however, especially as Olga had detained him, with moist eyes and a tender look. Later, alone with him for a moment, she had suddenly whispered: 'Stay here if you love me!' Grigore had been so surprised that, kissing her hand, he could only murmur: 'I must go, just because I love you so much!' Afterwards, at home, this reply struck him as having been particularly idiotic, and he had been ashamed of having uttered it, although it seemed Olga had not found it so stupid, because she had not laughed either then or later.

Olga's whisper had moved him deeply and had raised questions he had not yet thought of, or which perhaps he had been deliberately trying to stifle. He felt as if he were exposed even to himself. His friendship with Victor had been of old standing, of course, but now it seemed to him that Olga's eyes had made it a closer one. He had never admitted that his daily visits and dinners at the Predeleanu's had had any motive. He had never realized that he loved Olga, although love filled his heart; he never uttered a word of love even jokingly. At the most his eyes had spoken, against his will.

He reproached himself for the fact that in these moments of general distress his main preoccupation should be a new love. It began to dawn on him that he had cast off Nadina so finally precisely in order to further his approaches to Olga. Nadina, it was true, had wounded his feelings so deeply that there could be no question of continuing their married life together. All the same, had it not been for Olga he would not have had the strength of will to repudiate her so downrightly. He began to be tormented by the thought that he had left his father alone in the country out of sheer selfishness, just to remain near Olga and see her at least once a day. It was useless telling himself that he had only complied with the

wishes of the old man, who had told him to go. He was sure now that under different circumstances, that is, if he had not been in love, he would not have left Amara.

Baloleanu's emotion made itself manifest in an uncontrollable torrent of words. From the moment he had been appointed prefect of a rebellious county he had felt the need of presenting himself everywhere as a martyr sent to the scaffold. In Bucharest it had been reported very confidentially that one could not be at all sure of the army and that in the end it would be necessary to call in the Austrians in order to bring about complete pacification. It was said that the new government had no great confidence in the peasant-soldiers, either, but that they did not want to call in foreign aid before making one more final attempt.

'My dear friends, we're living the worst tragedy in the history of the Rumanian people!' said Baloleanu in a voice choked with emotion. 'The chief himself was moved yesterday afternoon, when he gave us instructions to carry out our awkward mission. He admitted that our task was extremely difficult and most dangerous. "I count", he told us, "on your tact, intelligence and energy! You will take with you the government's appeal with reforms which meet the most pressing grievances. It is an excellent and peaceful weapon, which should be handled with the greatest skill. In places where persuasion fails, however, where belligerent resistance is encountered, the army should be used with the utmost determination and vigour. To violence you will reply with violence, because order must be re-established at all costs . . ." That's what my chief said. We were overcome with emotion. It was a historic moment. And then he embraced each of us . . . Now the question arises, what shall we find on the spot? I'm a democrat by education and a convinced humanitarian. You can well imagine what it would mean to me, if I should have to order a bloody repression. But the higher interests of the nation! . . . A dreadful dilemma!'

Titu Herdelea heard him out with suitable gravity, but to himself he thought that Baloleanu was a great humbug. He remembered the emphasis with which this same man had preached a little while ago, at Enache's, the idea of dividing up the estates for the peasants. And now he was trying to justify beforehand the murder of those same peasants, if they should not be content with the reforms, in which no mention was made of dividing the land. It was on the tip of his tongue to remind him of his former promises. Grigore spoke in his stead, as if similar thoughts had been troubling him: 'If the peasants have started to rise for land, it will be hard to satisfy them with formal reforms!'

'Why, do you think we ought to divide up the estates?' questioned Baloleanu, rather surprised.

'I don't, but you did once!' Grigore answered simply.

'Oh well, a personal opinion is one thing and the possibility of realizing it another,' said the prefect, confused. 'At any rate such a revolutionary measure cannot be put in hand under pressure of peasant terrorism, can it? Besides, the present tragic disturbances have clearly shown that our peasants still need a great deal of social education. The savage acts that have been committed, even if only half of the reports are true, justify all our apprehensions, my dear fellow. You may be sure that I, who as you know, love the peasants, will nevertheless not hesitate to punish any act of violence with the greatest severity. To love them does not mean to tolerate their follies, nor to admit their pillaging. The peasants must be obedient and respect the law and the property of others, like everybody else, otherwise where should we be?'

Grigore Iuga smiled ironically: 'I only doubted the effect of the reforms on which you set such store, that's all. You may well imagine that perhaps I would have personal reasons to demand harsh measures against the peasants, especially if, as may be the case, they haven't spared us either though we have lived amongst them and have always done our duty by them.'

'That means we're of the same opinion, Grigoriță!' said Baloleanu. 'I'd have been surprised if it were otherwise, since we both love our country and the peasants to the same extent. Today, it is no more a question of politics, but of saving Rumania!'

He warmed up again to his subject and gave them touching details about his parting from Melanie, her presentiments, and his own courage. He spoke exclusively about himself all the time. Only in the stations did he interrupt himself to examine the people attentively. Whenever he saw a group of peasants, he pointed at them with dread, speaking in a low voice, as if they might overhear him: 'See how they're plotting! . . . I tell you, only fear can make the peasant understand!'

Then he took up the thread of his discourse again, speaking about the reforms, his chief and Melanie again, to cover his anxiety; now deeply moved, now pompous, but always with a tremor in his voice.

In the meantime the engine advanced cautiously, belching out larger clouds of smoke, frequently giving prolonged, nerve-racking signals, like the oft-repeated hoot of an owl.

3

'Be careful, papă, don't let anything happen to you,' urged Niculina, seeing Father Nicodim taking his stole and cross. 'You know well enough how mad they are.'

'Come on, sexton, we must do our duty!' murmured the old priest without heeding his daughter. 'He's been our master and he's built our church and God would punish us if we didn't do our Christian duty by him! And this afternoon there's the funeral of Melinte's wife . . . Come on!'

He toiled along, leaning on his staff and stopping now and then to rest by the roadside. At Iuga's manor the din had increased. The villa was still smouldering. Profira, the cook, kissed the priest's hand and led the way to the dead man's room.

'Oh, my God, my God, a bitter fate hast thou bestowed upon man!' muttered the priest, putting on his stole after having glanced for a moment at the body of boyar Miron. 'Hidden are Thy ways, oh Lord, Blessed by Thy name, now and for ever, Amen!'

The arrival of the priest did not in the least check the excitement of the peasants. Some of them followed him with their eyes until he entered the house, then continued their discussion. While some of them shouted wildly or looked for objects to take, the majority talked in scattered groups only about the division of the estate, each hoping to obtain a larger portion. Now that there were no more boyars, they thought it would be a good thing not to delay the measuring, since if each could secure his due, it was quite useless for the gentry to return, as the people were not going to give the land back, dead or alive. They all had their opinion as to how the land should be portioned out justly; naturally each considered that true justice could only be the method which assigned to him the best plot, nearer the village, and a tiny bit larger than that of the others. When somebody said that the other villages might also demand part of the estate, they one and all set on him furiously, ready to beat him up. The poorer ones would have liked to exclude from the apportioning those who already owned some land. The latter were accused of having done their utmost in order to buy Babaroaga, and of having been reluctant to join the uprising, expecting everything to drop into their laps without lifting so much as a finger. Thus they argued one with the other, for they were all simple men and no one had enough authority to make himself leader and obtain obedience. Toader Strinbu did try to raise his voice, but the men took no notice of him at such a weighty moment. He and Trifon were stout-hearted enough when there was a quarrel and you had need of clamour and impudence. What one needed now were mature, wise men, who knew how to weigh and arrange affairs. If Father Nicodim had been younger and more sprightly, he would have been called upon to administer justice, or better still Dragoș the teacher, if the boyars hadn't thrown him into prison.

'I see Petrică hasn't come, and him boasting only last night that he wanted to hear nothing more of rest until we had full justice!'

said Ignat Cercel to one of the larger groups. 'He would be a good adviser, he's sharp and could show us the right way.'

'That's what they're all doing, they're afraid.'

'What's that?' snapped Ignat. 'Petrică afraid? What's that you are saying? Petrică can juggle with three of the likes of you and you say he's afraid?'

'Why's he staying at home then? It's getting on to midday!'

'Maybe he's busy at home, like any one of us . . . But, when Petrică starts on a job, he never leaves it unfinished. His father too, God rest his soul, was as capable and decent a man as ever there was in the village!'

At that very moment Petrică and Nicolae Drăgoș appeared. Petre had fallen out seriously with his mother, who had not wanted him to go out; weeping and wailing that some misfortune would befall him. Niculae had had to face both his parents and his sister-in-law, who was the most frightened of them all, dreading lest anything should happen to her Ionel as the result of Nicolae's actions. The two young men had come to an understanding without words. They reckoned that it was too late now to go back and that they must therefore pursue things to the end, whatever happened. On sobering down after their fury, they had both realized that they would have to pay more cruelly than the others for the deeds done by all, if things returned again to what they had been before. For this reason, they had dropped in at the police station. The place had been deserted, doors open, everything scattered and overturned. They had hoped to find at least some cartridges for the rifles taken from the policemen, so as to be able to defend themselves if necessary, but there was nothing. Someone had said that the sergeant's wife had hidden somewhere in the village, but nobody knew where.

As soon as they mingled with the crowd, they were drawn into the general confusion. Discussion on the division of the estates started again from the beginning. After much lengthy and useless talk, Petre declared: 'It's no good, this is no job for us, because we'll only squabble and fight and never get on together. This is a job for a surveyor. Let's wait till things quieten down a bit and peace is established and then the government will send surveyors, to share the land out to each according to his due, to measure and allot whatever there is. Am I right?'

'You are! . . . That's so!' others agreed. 'They'll send us surveyors, that's what the authorities pay them for.'

'Why, yes, if there are no boyars, the surveyor will divide justly and according to the law!' put in Ignat delightedly.

'We've finished with the boyars!' shouted Leonte Orbișor arrogantly. 'We don't want any more boyars!'

‘Perhaps we’ve finished with them, Leonte, but have they finished with us?’ asked Nicolae Dragoş in a thick voice.

From all sides there arose protests that they didn’t want the landlords any more, that they would rather die to the last man than be ill-treated and oppressed again.

‘Let’s see you do things, I know you’re good at bragging,’ said Petre.

4

In Piteşti station a whole column of refugee landowners and lease-holders were waiting. At their head was the former prefect, Boerescu, who in view of the national emergency had set aside any considerations of political animosity and decided to hand over his office to the new prefect and especially to acquaint him with the situation. It was vanity, however, which over and above any higher motives obliged Boerescu, deeply outraged by the ungrateful peasants, and much against his will, to talk to his successor. And after he had given himself the trouble of going from village to village, advising and teaching the peasants like a father, they had got up to mischief as soon as his back had turned. He could not forgive them. The villains had, moreover, not been ashamed to set fire to and ransack his own manor at Rociu.

Grigore Iuga introduced them, as Baloleanu, who was a stranger, knew nobody. Then he and Titu Herdelea withdrew, so that they should not hinder the two in their official business, after all had agreed to meet for supper in the evening. The crowd of refugees surrounded the new prefect and assaulted him with all kinds of grievances. Baloleanu listened to some of them, and sympathized with some, but seeing that in this way he would never move from the station he addressed them all in a voice vibrating with the emotion demanded by the circumstances: ‘Gentlemen, I understand your grief, and appreciate the natural revolt which burns in the hearts of everybody because of the lawless acts whose victims you have been! I have come to take the necessary measures and re-establish order. Allow me, therefore, a respite of several hours to investigate the situation, obtain official information on the events that have taken place in this county, and then take a decision. Please believe me that we will do all that stands in our power to relieve your sufferings!’

Taking Boerescu’s arm, he opened a path through the desperate and angry crowd. Many tearful voices took up the same complaint.

‘They have beggared us, the robbers! . . .’

The noisiest and bitterest was the retired colonel, Ştefănescu, who accompanied him to the carriage, wailing all the way.

'They have left me destitute, sir! . . . Forty years' labour turned to dust and ruin. I was defenceless. They mocked us as they liked, the thieves . . . My life is all they left me, sir!'

Grigore Iuga hurriedly shook the hands of many acquaintances and heard, in passing, fragments of complaints. He was impatient to find out something about his father and Amara, but did not dare to ask anybody outright; on the one hand, because he realized that these people were full of their own sufferings and therefore could not take in the woes of others, and on the other, more especially, for fear that his worst presentiments, which became keener the closer came the moment when he must find out the truth, should be fulfilled. All of a sudden he heard a very familiar voice behind him: 'Master Grigoriță! . . . Master Grigoriță! . . .'

'Buruiană! You here too?' said young Iuga, glad to meet him. 'What's happened in our place? Tell me, tell me quickly, you must know something!'

Cosma Buruiană didn't want to confess immediately that he had run away before anything had happened. In a more than usually snivelling voice he answered: 'Oh! My God, Master Grigoriță. Wrack and ruin! . . . Look, I escaped just as you see me! When I used to tell you that our peasants were dogs, you scoffed at me and didn't believe me . . . And nowhere have worse deeds been done than at Amara! There is the nest of the revolution and everything started from there! . . . A calamity! I should however, thank God that I, at least, have been saved together with my family, because if I'd listened to Mr Miron, God knows what I might have suffered. But I'm prudent, as you know, I didn't wait for the rioting to break out. I loaded my family into a carriage and drove the horses off as fast as I could!'

'Father stayed behind, did he?' pressed Grigore.

'Well, Master Grigoriță, as a matter of fact that's where I left him,' said the lease-holder hesitantly. 'You know what kind of a man he is . . .'

'Yes, but what happened?' insisted Iuga impatiently.

'Many things are said round here, Master Grigoriță' went on Cosma Buruiană more boldly. 'Nobody can know the truth however; since Wednesday night all the telephone lines have been cut and there's no possibility of communicating with the village. The news one hears is spread by word of mouth, so that in the end one can never tell what's true. At any rate, one can't expect any good news, and our people must have caused great havoc, because they're capable of any excess. Yesterday morning I met the judge from Costești. What he told me made me cross myself. He came in the train with a lawyer from Bucharest who had been with Madame Nadina at Lespezi to sell the estate at Babaroaga. Perhaps you

know him? What he's endured, poor man, made my hair stand on end. He escaped from death only by the skin of his teeth, running away over the fields from Gliganu to Costești, where he arrived in a terrible state. I'd never have believed things were so bad, however, if I hadn't met Platamonu today, who . . .'

Buruiană then related with many flourishes all that had happened to Platamonu to avoid telling him what was said in town about Miron Iuga and Nadina. They left the station and walked along the boulevard towards the town. Colonel Ștefănescu, who was looking for Grigore, because he had seen him in the new prefect's company, caught up with them. He asked him immediately to arrange an interview with the prefect, from whom he wished to obtain a detachment of soldiers and, if possible, cannon, to regain his estate and punish the villains who had plundered him and driven him out. Then, after depicting in detail his own boundless sufferings, he told Grigore, without any circumspection, that in these parts it was rumoured that Miron Iuga had been murdered by the peasants, adding, however, that he didn't believe it, because though the ruffians had certainly done many evil deeds, they had not, as yet, spilt blood. It was also common talk that Nadina had been killed, after having been raped by a group of villains. But all news should be regarded with the utmost reserve. Passing from one to another, everything became distorted and exaggerated.

'There is no need to exaggerate when the actual truth is so horrible!' continued the colonel. 'As if murder were necessary to bring about one's ruin! As for myself, if I hadn't been thinking of my poor daughters, who would have remained alone in the world, I would have measured my strength with the brutes . . .'

He took up the story of his misfortunes again, interrupted more than once by Cosma Buruiană, who was attempting to relate his own once more. Grigore Iuga did not listen any more. He had guessed enough, even from Buruiană's reluctance. The colonel's words, with their military brutality, had upset him more than they had impressed him. He was able at last to get rid of them both in the public gardens. Only then did Titu Herdelea dare to say comfortingly, but without much conviction: 'Perhaps not everything is true . . .'

'It's true, my dear friend,' said Grigore sadly. 'I felt misfortune was coming, some days ago when I was in Amara. How I regret not having stayed at home, even against my father's wish. If I'd been there, perhaps things would not have come to this!'

In the meantime, Baloleanu arrived at the prefecture, where another group of refugees from the country were waiting. Boerescu introduced several officials to the new prefect and showed him the rebellious localities on the map of the county on the desk. He

handed him the dossier with the reports on the disturbances, not forgetting to draw his attention to the fact that his house had also been plundered. After thanking him and exchanging various other amiabilities worthy of a barrister, Baloleanu got rid of him, because he was only wasting his time. He didn't want to lose a single minute. He was anxious to prove to his chief that the latter had had a good idea when he had called on Baloleanu.

He immediately summoned the chief prosecutor, the police inspector and the commander of the troops from the Pitești region, as well as the chairman of the County Court, the latter however he called mostly as an act of deference towards the court. He began studying the dossier with the reports and the map of the county, pending their arrival.

'Gentlemen, in three days at the most I wish to establish peace and order in this county!' he declared solemnly and gravely to the four representatives of the authorities when they assembled in his office.

He delivered a short patriotic speech, vibrating with energy. It made a strong impression. The chief prosecutor, Toma Grecescu, a thin, beardless, placid man, looked admiringly at the new prefect's full, round, impressive face, which emanated such an air of confidence. The police inspector, Corbuleanu, nodded approvingly at every word spoken by his new chief. The chairman of the County Court, Manole Obogleanu, a mean old man, poorly clad, felt a stranger to these discussions, but possessing a small estate in the neighbourhood and being afraid the peasants would ransack it, he was anxious to find out what protective measures the new government was prepared to take. Only General Dadărlat, already familiar with Boerescu's ways, tried to interrupt him on two occasions, but was reproofed gently but firmly.

'Now I have finished; it is your turn to speak, General!' Baloleanu ended with an ironical smile.

The general had only desired to say that he, too, had suffered losses. Now, coughing loudly, he stated that in his opinion the utmost energy should be used, otherwise the fire of rebellion would spread to areas where the peasants had not yet risen.

'That is the reason why I have been given this heavy responsibility!' answered the prefect gravely.

After hearing from Corbulescu that in the rebellious villages the police had been beaten and driven out because they were few in number and had not been allowed to use their arms, Baloleanu asked General Dadărlat if he could count on the troops under him in case of emergency.

'Sir, my troops always carry out their orders!' the general retorted, his pride stung.

'Well, naturally,' said Baloleanu, a little at a loss, 'I didn't mistrust the troops, you didn't exactly understand. What I meant was whether the soldiers, especially the reservists, can be really relied upon? You may know that in some places certain defections have occurred and I do not wish to have any surprise here.'

'No, no, sir, I guarantee my men,' the general repeated.

'At any rate, in order to avoid any possible hesitation, I should like you to ensure that no soldiers from the rebellious areas are included in the detachments designated for repressive action!' said the prefect very portentously.

They then discussed the plans of the expedition to pacify the county. Baloleanu decided that a detachment of a thousand men with six cannons should be ready on the morrow, Sunday, at eight o'clock in the morning, near Costești railway station. He too would be there, together with the representatives of the law.

'Any resistance will be immediately crushed by the army, after the legal summons, of course!' concluded Baloleanu, in a martial manner.

'And what shall we do, sir, if the villages rise again after the troops have left?' asked General Dadărlat, who was anxious to prove to all that he had ideas and was as cautious as any good commander.

'Those villages will be razed to the ground, General, with cannon,' said the prefect, raising his head haughtily and sticking out his stomach.

'That's right, sir,' agreed Dadărlat.

Until evening came, Baloleanu received refugee landowners, who complained vehemently and demanded immediate damages or at least substantial financial aid, so that they should not die of hunger in the streets of the town. Most of them asked that special troops should accompany them to their estates to defend them against the peasants' fury, whilst others insisted upon having cannon brought to destroy those who had plundered their possessions. The prefect made many kind promises to all, but excused himself for the moment, saying that he could not give all his attention to their grievances, his first care being to restore order. He assured them that their losses would be made good and invited them to register their respective demands, specifying in detail the damages they had suffered.

Only at about nine o'clock did he meet Gărgău Iuga and Titu at the restaurant. As he had found out about Miron from Boerescu, the prefect embraced young Iuga tenderly.

'I just can't say how sorry I'd be, if it were true, dear Grigoriță, but I do hope providence has been more merciful!'

He ate and drank greedily, ignoring the fact that he was getting

blown out, and chattered ceaselessly, praising himself particularly for the ingenious measures he had taken. He found occasion to explain that he would gladly let them accompany him up to Costești, but that farther on this would be, he regretted to say, impossible, because from Costești onwards he was on painful official duty and no unofficial person could be admitted.

'I'll follow you, all the same, at a certain distance, even without your permission,' said Grigore firmly. 'It's a duty, Alexandru!'

'Well, of course, there can be no doubt about it!' answered the prefect fervently. 'Don't think for a moment I don't understand your feelings, dear boy. I only wanted to say that in my official capacity . . .'

'If the authorities have not been capable of preventing the misfortune, they should at least not thwart my plans!' said Grigore reproachfully.

'Well, naturally, naturally!' said Baloleanu conciliatingly, trying to change the subject, then adding volubly: 'Besides, you see, I've given strict orders that . . .'

5

On Sunday morning the news spread in Amara that the army was coming. Some carters from other villages farther down the valley, coming home from Pitești had met a great number of soldiers and cannon, and it seemed that an officer on horseback had even cursed them and added: 'I'll teach you to revolt!' Others, coming from the villages lying up the valley, reported that in the neighbourhood of Costești there were as many soldiers as leaves on the trees or blades of grass in the fields, ready to start on their way there to bring back the boyars, if they had not already started.

Amara began to seethe. At first the news going round the village stirred a certain curiosity. The peasants repeated it to one another in surprise and perplexity, shaking their heads and questioning each other with their eyes. Then, as they became convinced that the news must be true, their surprise turned into amazement: 'Don't they know the king's order? Or don't they want to obey? Have they taken sides with the boyars?'

And slowly, slowly, the village was seized by indignation and wrath. A crowd of men and women gathered quickly in the space in front of the inn. They all spoke gruffly. The deepest concern was graven on each face. Questions jostled each other in a rush: 'Why is the army coming? . . . To kill us? . . . What have we done to them? . . . Are we dogs or men; why don't they let us live in peace? . . . Haven't the boyars oppressed us enough? . . .'

Answers came from here and there, at first timidly, then daring and clamorous: 'Let the army come, we won't give in! . . . Better the lot of us died, and be delivered of all our troubles! . . . We're not afraid of the army! . . . We'll drive them out with our pitchforks if they come against us! . . . We'll not suffer any more . . . Out with your hatchets! . . .'

The women shouted even louder than the men. Nistor Mucenicu's Anghelina, miserable and snivelling, with her child in her arms, shrieked like a mad thing, her eyes bulging out of her head: 'They've killed my husband in their regiments and it's still not enough for them, may they die a dog's death! May sickness and disease take them! May hell's fire burn them as they have burnt my heart out!'

Busuioc the innkeeper came out and stood in front of the inn with a satisfied air, listening for some time to the din, then, apparently having nothing better to do, he chided them: 'Well, lads, you didn't listen to those who wanted to teach you to keep quiet, and now . . .'

The peasants, as if lashed by a whip, dashed at him furiously, glad to have an outlet for their anger. Busuioc managed in the nick of time to retreat into the inn and from there into his house. Some of the peasants broke and smashed whatever they got hold of, others grabbed the drinks.

The riot lasted only a few minutes. Outside, Petre arrived with a group of young men.

'Petrică's coming! . . . Petrică's come! . . . There's Petrică! Wait a minute, Petrică's just come!'

'What's up?' he asked, seeing the scramble inside the inn. 'What on earth has Uncle Christache done, to make you ransack his inn as if he were one of the boyars?'

While some of the peasants were wroth by cursing the innkeeper, others were impatient to inform him of the approach of the army, some in fear, others in anger and all with questioning glances, as if their fate depended on his answer. Ignat Cercel was the most doleful: 'Now what shall we do, Petrică? You tell us, so that we all know what to do!'

With piercing eyes, Petre scrutinized the crowd surrounding him, the muscles of his bony face taut beneath the stretched, sunburnt, shining skin. Then his mouth suddenly broke into a large and scornful laugh: 'If you're afraid of the army, why didn't you stay at home? You ought never to have risen against the boyars if you thought that they would stay with their hands in their pockets and let us take the land, and even knock them about a bit! Nowhere is land to be found for nothing! One pays for it with money, or with something else, but pay one must!'

'We're not afraid of the army, so don't sneer at us!' mumbled

Ignat in his whining voice. 'But if they come we must know what to do!'

'We needn't even be afraid!' continued Petre, 'the army's only coming to frighten us!'

'That's so!' Toader Strîmbu shouted angrily. 'They're not allowed to raise their arms against us, we've been soldiers too, and we know it!'

Nicolae Dragoş, who had been a sergeant, added that even if the officers gave orders to fire at the peasants, not in the air, it might be possible that the soldiers would not obey the orders and that they would cross over to their brothers and fathers.

'It'd be very good if things were to happen as you say!' Serafim Mogoş said doubtfully. 'But we mustn't set our hopes on that! In a few hours' time, if not sooner, we'll have the soldiers and the police in the village and then what beating and tortures there'll be!'

Petre admitted that Serafim was right. The soldiers might not fire, but they would bring back the police and the landlords.

'But never that! . . . We won't stand the army in our midst!' shouted Petre. 'The army's got no business in our village! . . . We don't need the army here! . . . Let them stay in the towns to protect the boyars, we can protect ourselves!'

As he shouted, he became more heated and furious, as if he were contending against invisible foes. The peasants flocked around him, still puffing and blowing from their exertions in the inn, yelling now and then as if to prove their strength and their courage. These who had got hold of drinks kept inside the inn and loudly sang a brave song, cursing Busuioc and the boyars.

'Let everybody, young and old, come to the outskirts of the village!' Petre ordered curtly, as if he were in the army.

It was necessary to repeat several times that nobody should come empty-handed, but that all should be armed with whatever they could get hold of, an iron pitchfork at least.

'From now on, it's as God wills!' murmured Petre, crossing himself.

6

'Now, dear Grigoriţă, we must separate,' said Baloleanu as the train entered Costeşti station. 'If you take my advice, you'll just stop here and wait until I send word to you. I hope to have pacified the villages by tonight, including your Amara. Then you can go without any danger. So, dear boy, goodbye. Goodbye, Mr Herdelca.'

He shook hands, very moved. His podgy face had gone pale and emotion had changed his voice. He descended on to the platform

gravely, almost depressed. Major Tănăsescu, who was in charge of the troops, introduced himself. He was a man with bushy eyebrows and bristling moustaches, sharp eyes and a harsh voice. He reported that according to orders received both directly from General Dadărlat, divisional commanding officer, and from his regimental commander, he was at the prefect's disposal.

'What troops have you got, Major?' asked Baloleanu.

'One battalion at full fighting strength and a battery with six cannon!' answered the officer.

The prefect thanked him coldly and looked around. With the exception of a few officers, here too, the platform was crowded with a compact group of refugees. In the interests of his own popularity and those of his party, he felt it wise to go over to them: 'Gentlemen, we have come to restore order and it shall be done without delay! We wish you therefore to give us your entire confidence and to help us by being patient!'

The retired Colonel Ștefănescu, who had come by the same train, persistently pushed forward until he was able to whisper in the major's ear, asking the latter not to forget him, because he had placed all his trust in him. God and his luck had willed that the major placed in command of the mixed detachment should be Tănăsescu, the old comrade with whose family his daughters had found shelter for fear of the peasants and to whose place he too had retreated after having been driven out.

The prefect then hastened to the town hall, followed by the prosecutors and the commanding officer. Here, the district administrator gave him all the information he had concerning the situation in the rebellious villages. The report was by no means encouraging, especially as it implied grim resistance on the part of the peasants. The news had been brought, it was true, by people who had run away or who had been driven out of the villages, spreading fear and terror of the rebels' power, relentlessness and savagery. Baloleanu, notwithstanding the fluttering of his heart, maintained an outward appearance of calm and determination.

'At any rate, we shall proceed without undue haste and without feelings of hatred! We bring peace to the peaceful; on the others we shall use force. We do not wish to shed blood, but will not hesitate to make use of arms when necessary. Those will be our general methods, gentlemen!'

Then, with the map of the county on the table, he showed them the plan which had been discussed the previous evening at the prefecture in Pitești. He decided that he and the chief prosecutor should travel in a carriage at the head of the column. The major called his attention to the fact that this might be dangerous, and asked that he should be allowed to apply the military provisions

regarding the advance of troops. Baloleanu realized that he was risking his life and accepted the major's proposal that a strong patrol with an officer should first reconnoitre the villages and ensure respect and order.

In the meantime Grigore Iuga, who had remained at the station with young Herdelea, was surrounded by various acquaintances who, with the long faces required by the circumstances, were expressing their condolences. Grigore's eyes fell upon Isbăşescu: 'Come here, come here, man. Let me find out at last what happened!'

'How do you do, Master Grigorişă!' the dazed book-keeper replied. 'Excuse me for not daring . . . There are others here too from our village. God alone knows how they escaped from the clutches of those fiends!'

Grigore had not noticed Boianciu the sergeant, nor the tax-collector Birzotescu, although they were standing close to Isbăşescu. In less than twenty-four hours he had received so much bad news that his heart was quite broken, but he still knew nothing definite. All his information had been obtained only from others who in their turn had had it second-hand. The uncertainty tormented him more than if he had known the truth, however cruel. His impatience to get sooner to Amara caused him deeper anguish, just because he wished so much to get at the truth. He was convinced that if he knew for certain his troubled spirit would be calmer.

They all started together and on the way each in turn told him what they knew. Birzotescu annoyed him with the vicissitudes of his flight, and Grigore interrupted him. Boianciu first told him sadly how his wife had remained among the peasants. And how she had pleaded with him to take her away! If something had befallen her, he would have her on his conscience until his death . . . Then he told them how he had been disarmed and chased by the rebels. Naturally, so as not to lose face, he made it a more or less heroic story: as soon as the fire broke out at Ruginoasa, he had run there and taken all the proper measures to locate the fire as required by the Army Manual. Unfortunately, he had in the first place come up against the peasants' ill-will, and the second against a complete absence of water, so that hardly anything had been saved. He had at least been able to find traces of the evildoers who had started the fire. Next morning he had reported to boyar Miron, who had given him orders not to take any notice, so as to avoid provoking the peasants still more. He had hardly had time to breathe when news came that at Lespezi, too, they had been burning and committing even worse excesses. Then, to top this, the news had come that Mr Cosma's manor was burning. He had started out without delay to establish order, even if it meant shedding blood. It was evident that the thieves were working according to plan and that there was

a real plot. Near the inn he had come across a gathering of peasants which had seemed quiet and peaceful. He got into their midst and then . . .

Grigore Iuga listened until the end. He had at last heard how the rising had started. From Isbășescu he would learn the rest. Besides, it was from Isbășescu that the news of Miron Iuga's death had been heard by the others. Since the latter had arrived yesterday at ten o'clock in the small market town of Costești, dressed in peasant costume, he had been the hero of the day. He had had to narrate at least twenty times over to the gentlemen in Costești the horrors that had occurred in Amara. The district administrator had immediately telephoned the news officially to the prefecture, terrifying the former prefect Boerescu, who had spread the news through the whole town. The mayor had offered hospitality to Isbășescu, taking him to his own house, and had obtained for him from the assistant judge a suit of town clothes, which Isbășescu, however, in order to maintain the halo of a martyr as long as possible, had only put on that morning.

'My story is longer, Master Grigoriță!' he now said in the woeful voice suitable to the occasion. 'If you want to hear it, will you be kind enough to come to my host the mayor, as we are quite near, and I'll tell it from beginning to end! Oh, my God! The things I have lived to see and what I have gone through, I can hardly believe myself that such things have really happened! At least I have escaped alive, God be praised, whereas poor Mr Miron, God rest his soul . . .'

'He's dead?' asked Grigore in a stifled voice.

'They killed him, the devils . . .'

'When? Some days ago?'

'The day before yesterday, Friday, towards evening!' answered Isbășescu.

'Let's go to your host, and tell me everything,' murmured Grigore, sick at heart.

The prefect's conference with the officers and the prosecutors continued for some time. Baloleanu was in the habit of repeating an explanation ten times over in detail, to be sure that he had made himself thoroughly understood. He did it at home, he did it at his office to his secretary for detailed proceedings, and all the more did he do it today, when he was taking decisions upon which his own life and the fate of the country might depend. At last, feeling that they had fully grasped his intentions, he adopted an heroic attitude and uttered in exalted tones: 'Now, gentlemen, forward to fulfil our duty!'

Although the carriage in which he had taken his place beside the chief prosecutor was preceded by a company of soldiers with loaded rifles and belts bulging with cartridges, Baloleanu felt his heart quake. He thought of Melanie, anxious and tearful, as he had left her on the platform of the Gara de Nord. He only hoped it had not been a bad omen! One could be sure of nothing at all with these peasants, caught up in a common madness. They were so many that no army on earth could master them. What if this expedition were all of a sudden surrounded and attacked from all sides by several thousands of these desperate wretches? As a matter of fact, you couldn't have absolute faith in the army either; once you had set out against the peasants you could expect your own soldiers to slaughter you at any moment.

'Sir, how do you explain the fact that the disorder has assumed such unfortunate proportions precisely in this rich county?' Baloleanu suddenly asked the chief prosecutor, to disperse his dismal thoughts and revive his failing courage.

Toma Grecescu was seldom known to uphold social theories, and then only when he was obliged in his speeches for the crown, to combat an especially difficult counsel for defence. On such occasions he was naturally able to prepare his speech beforehand. The prefect's question took him unawares. He had had no respite to think over the causes of the present revolt. In his leisure hours he amused himself by sitting down to a game of poker like everybody else in Pitești high society. So he gave a tentative answer: 'There has been a general slackening in the spirit of order and authority, sir. I don't know how or why, because such investigation does not fall within my competence, but it seems to me that social discipline has greatly lessened recently almost everywhere. The reaction of the peasants, as of all primitive people, is bound to be a sudden burst of savagery.'

Major Tănăsescu, on a beautiful bay horse had trotted off slowly in front of the main body of troops and even in front of the vanguard, in the wake of the reconnaissance patrol. Baloleanu saw him galloping back at top speed, and shivered. The outline of a village could be perceived in that direction. He put his hand on the prosecutor's arm, to arrest the flow of his intellectual effort: 'A moment, please . . . what's happened? Why is the major galloping so?'

Tănăsescu was only hurrying back to report that in the village of Vlăduța all was calm. It was true they had set fire to the manor and plundered the place, but now they had recovered their wits and asked forgiveness. In order to avoid any future outbreak, he would leave in the village a detachment of soldiers under one officer.

'Bravo, Major! thank you!' said Baloleanu, greatly relieved.

All the village flocked into the lane in front of the manor. When the carriage arrived with the prefect, Major Tănăsescu, who had galloped there beforehand, shouted: 'On your knees, you robbers, or I'll make mince-meat out of you!'

Everybody fell on their knees. Grateful to the major for displaying so much authority, Baloleanu descended from the carriage and approached the kneeling multitude, also shouting, but with a hint of official pity in his voice: 'What have you done, you wretches!'

'Forgive us, sir! . . . Take pity on us! . . . ' stammered hundreds of tearful voices.

'Are you sorry for what you've done?' continued the prefect.

'God forgive our sinful souls! Have pity and mercy on us!' cried the kneeling group of men.

After having warned them that they would have to pay all the damages to the last farthing, and that those who proved guilty would suffer the rigours of the law, the major read them the government's appeal and proceeded to explain it but to these promising and forgiving words he added a harsh sequel: 'Whoever commits an illegal act, however small and whoever does not obey these orders, shall be shot immediately, without trial! Nobody may leave the village without the permission of the officer remaining here in charge of the troops!'

He then gave orders to the second lieutenant to stay with his men, at the disposal of Colonel Ștefănescu, who would arrive soon, and to assist him to the best of his ability.

The prefect was very pleased. This was an officer after his own heart. He even thought, if the major should continue like this to the end, of proposing him for a decoration. He, however, as a civilian, and the political representative of the government, had to be more indulgent. The government needed the sympathy of the citizens, even that of the peasants. The army was indifferent to the sympathy of anyone, whoever they were. Everybody was obliged to show affection for the army. If you didn't love the army or if you rose against it, you were sent to prison. What a good thing it would be if the government, too, could compel the people to show everlasting affection!

In the next village, Ionești, the prefect's speech was more friendly because no riots had occurred there; but then, neither was there any landlord's manor.

As soon as the column left Ionești, Major Tănăsescu went back to the company at the rear to give his final orders to the captain, whose responsibility it was to restore peace in the villages on the right bank of the Teleorman as far as Izvoru. A public prosecutor and the district administrator in an open trap represented the civil authorities.

At Babaroaga a platoon under the command of a lieutenant was stationed along a line between Gliganu and Lespezi to guard the flank. Having been informed that the disorders in Gliganu had been more serious, the lieutenant must take all possible precautions, and would, if necessary, remain with the entire platoon to occupy the village, sending only a patrol to Lespezi, the rallying point, to report on the situation.

The main column continued towards Birlogu on a road along which few carts passed. In Birlogu, the prefect was agreeably surprised to see a piece of white cloth hanging pacifically at each gate.

'Oh! yes, this is a civilized village!' declared Baloleanu on being informed that nothing untoward had happened. The modest manor, uninhabited and used only as a granary, had remained untouched.

A group of peasants was awaiting the arrival of the troops at the village hall. The prefect, after having praised them for keeping quiet, spoke with pathos, saying that the government was attending to their requirements, deciding to give all facilities to those who had behaved well and to help them in every way. As a proof of the government's solicitude, he read slowly, in a voice shaken with emotion, the list of reforms, explaining to the people in simple words the passages which seemed to him less clear. The peasants listened with bare heads, puckered brows, and strange perplexed glances.

'Farewell, good people, and keep to the straight path in future, too!' shouted Baloleanu at the end of his speech and climbed into the carriage.

All the way to Lespezi, for half an hour that is, he dilated on the merits of these brave villagers, who had had the moral strength to maintain order in the midst of the conflagration, that had spread throughout the whole region. Chief prosecutor Grecescu, basing himself upon his long experience in penal questions, took it upon himself to remark that it would be practical to immediately carry out brief inquiries in the villages through which they were passing, to discover the principal agitators and arrest them, in order to prevent the riots from beginning over again.

'Well! of course, you're right from the legal point of view!' answered the prefect, volubly. 'But account must be taken of the political factor, my dear sir! The riots have become too general and the minds of the people too heated. In the first place we must try to calm them. The peasants should be quietened without fear of reprisals, which might exasperate them and therefore aggravate the situation. Those who are guilty will be punished and no mistake, to serve as an example, but only after we've obtained a general lessening of tension. Then, proceedings will begin and relentless penalties will be applied in order to avoid the repetition of such a national calamity!'

In Lespezi, on the outskirts of the village, Major Tăpănescu reported, seething with indignation: 'Sir, this is a village of criminals! Murders have been committed here! Here we must . . .'

'Keep calm, Major, keep calm!' said Baloleanu, frightened. 'Our task is very painful and that is why we should always keep cool.'

Grumbling and muttering curses, the major led Baloleanu directly to the church. A young, beardless priest, dressed in his vestments, was waiting at the door with an unctuous, frightened expression on his face, for the major had just sworn at him and said he would shoot him.

'Sir, we were helpless, we were unable to hinder . . .' stammered the priest, bowing humbly.

'Get out of the way, you villain!' hissed the major, pushing him aside from the door with his elbow.

Near the altar, on an improvised bier, lay Nadina's body, covered with a shroud. The major lifted a corner of the shroud, unveiling a bruised and disfigured face. Baloleanu turned away, exclaiming brokenly: 'Oh, the brutes, the brutes! . . . the poor woman!'

He stepped quickly outside. A stifling smell persisted in his nostrils, so upsetting that it turned his stomach. He drew fresh air into his lungs several times, breathing indignant words, until his eyes fell upon the young priest who had remained quite still near the entrance.

'For heaven's sake, Father, how could you allow such a deed? Poor Grigoriță! He'll be broken-hearted when . . .'

The priest whiningly excused himself. Everything had occurred so suddenly that neither he nor anybody else had been able to interfere. Later he had found out that some men from Amara had been the instigators of these crimes and committed some of the worst deeds. He knew who the offenders were as did all the village, but he did not dare to disclose their names for fear of rendering his life impossible in Lespezi. He told the prefect how Matei Dulmanu had saved the lady's body when the mob had set fire to the manor and how he had lain it in the church, near the altar, so that no madman should disgrace it in any way, which might well have happened in these days of unparalleled rioting. Finally, he added that he had sheltered and hidden in his own house, at great risk, the German chauffeur, who had been wounded and whom the people, bent on revenge, had threatened to murder.

'Enough,' shouted Baloleanu horrified. 'I will take the necessary steps. Until then . . . Where is the mayor?'

'We've got no mayor in this village, we belong to Amara . . .'

Baloleanu paid no attention to the priest's answer; he turned to the chief prosecutor and told him about Nadina and Grigore, pitying them both alike.

'We must however keep calm, we must remain cool!' he sighed sadly with a certain dignity. 'Let's go and do our duty.'

He went down the village lane, turning over in his mind the speech he wanted to make to the peasants gathered in front of the ruins of Gogu Ionescu's manor. He was determined to reprimand them severely, but without angering them, so as not to endanger the campaign of appeasement which had begun under fairly favourable auspices. The major, who had left to give an order, came back, furious: 'These villains won't listen to anything, sir! If we continue like this, we risk being attacked, sir! They believe we're afraid of them, sir!'

He had received a report from the lieutenant commanding the platoon sent to Gliganu, in which the latter said he had to remain on the spot, as the situation was too troubled. At the same time, somebody had attracted his attention to a cloud of smoke rising in the direction of Birlogu. In answer to the kind words and praise of a little while ago, and to the reforms and facilities mentioned in the government's appeal, those scoundrels had set fire to the manor as soon as the troops had left the village. That was serious. If they dared rebel so close in the rear of the army, that meant that the evil was more deeply rooted than had been thought at first. Major Tănăsescu plainly told the prefect that having the entire responsibility of the troop's safety, he could not allow himself to be encircled. Baloleanu was terrified. He saw himself surrounded by bands of wild peasants, beaten, tortured and killed. His Melanie's predictions were on the verge of coming true.

'Major, please, take whatever measures you think necessary!' he said abruptly, with a slight tremor in his voice.

A detachment of two platoons was sent to re-establish order in Birlogu. The entire village was to be punished immediately in order to set an example; men, women and children without exception should be beaten. If the slightest resistance should be attempted, the soldiers had orders to fire and cannon should be brought in if necessary to raze this nest of rebels from the face of the earth.

No sooner had the detachment started in forced march towards Birlogu than the reconnaissance patrol came back from Amara, reporting that the peasants there, armed with scythes, pitchforks, hatchets and several fire-arms had gathered on the outskirts of the village and refused to allow the soldiers to go on, threatening to kill the officer if he should try to enter the village.

Baloleanu turned pale. He felt as if he had fallen into a dreadful trap. The district administrator had been right when he had said that the peasants were well organized and quite capable of facing the army.

'Now, major, what next?' he questioned hoarsely, perplexed.

Major Tănăsescu's eyes glittered furiously. He answered pugnaciously: 'Leave it to me, sir, we know how to handle them.'

He gave orders. The troops moved forward. Baloleanu, climbing into his carriage, asked Tănăsescu, as if controlling a major safety valve, and in hushed tones so that the others should not hear:

'You're sure of your men, I hope, Major?'

'The Rumanian soldier obeys orders, sir. He is the most loyal soldier in the world!'

On leaving Lespezi, the prefect confided to the chief prosecutor: 'In this situation, you may well imagine what would happen if we couldn't count upon the discipline of the army! What a disaster! I'm speaking, of course, in general, without thinking of the fate which would await those who, like us, are sacrificing themselves for the good of the country!'

7

On the outskirts of the village the peasants were rushing back and forth, ranging over the highway and throughout the neighbourhood. With flushed faces and shining eyes they were waiting and urging each other on as if for a great marriage feast. Everybody had something to say, as if the others had known nothing or had not even been present; they were all repeating the same things and almost in the same words. Very occasionally there was a lull in the uproar and then they would feel oppressed by the ominous silence, and would try to drive it off by still more dreadful shouts, as if they were all afraid of waking up from the happy dreams of a drinking bout.

'Look, they're coming again!' several voices called out at the same moment.

All heads turned towards Lespezi. They had known the soldiers would return, yet each had secretly hoped that they would not.

'Let them come, let them come, aren't we ready for them?' yelled Petre Petre in a high-pitched voice, so utterly changed that it didn't seem his own.

Nicolae Dragoș, next to him, gripping a pitchfork in his hand, was muttering oaths filled with hatred: 'We'll do them in, God damn their bloody eyes! . . .'

The curses stuck in his throat and he ground his teeth. Chirilă Păun, keeping close to Nicolae, screeched like an old hag, catching hold of a rifle he had taken from the police and holding it up threateningly like a mace. Further on, in the midst of the jostling crowd, Toader Ștrimbu, armed in the same way, swore he'd find no peace until he had crushed the head of the officer commanding the

troops, even if he were a general. Silent and frowning Serafim Mogoş also had a rifle, that of the sergeant, which he had slung over his shoulder like a good recruit, although he had not done any military service. Behind Petre, following him like a shadow, Ilie Cîrlan was busily waving a rifle too, and crying incessantly, as if not able to think of anything else: 'Tell them, Petrică! . . . tell them, Petrică! . . .' Shouts and oaths broke out in one place and then in another. Anger shone in their eyes and poured from their throats like poisoned breath, enveloping the whole crowd in the same invisible haze. Scythes, hatchets, pitchforks and hoes were brandished in the air as if to frighten and stop the oncoming danger by threats. The sharp screams of the women and children split the hubbub raised by the men like so many pin pricks in a thick hemp cloth.

While the commotion continued, the column of soldiers crawled along the high road like a huge black caterpillar. Playful sunbeams, falling on the glittering bayonets, made tremulous glints in the air. Soon the ranks could be distinguished as well as the several riders, the open carriage with the prefect and the prosecutor, then the cannon, each drawn by six horses, ending the apocalyptic body like a flat tail with metal scales.

As the soldiers approached, the uproar of the peasants rose higher like a wild threatening cloud. The crowd of men spread across the high road, thinning out, as if they all wished to see the foe and face him.

A harsh order rang out in the vanguard of the column. Two companies deployed in line, to the right and to the left of the road, and came to a standstill at a distance of about a hundred yards from the crowd of peasants. Between them, on the road, prefect Baloleanu's carriage appeared, escorted by the major on horseback.

'Keep calm, major, keep calm!' stuttered Baloleanu, his face as white as a sheet. He descended timidly from the carriage followed by the chief prosecutor, who seemed the coolest of them all.

'At your service, sir!' said Major Tănăsescu, brandishing his silver-handled riding crop so violently that the horse pricked its ears. 'Now you may see and hear and convince yourself that they don't deserve anything but bullets and bayonets!'

'No, no! We must first . . .' stammered Baloleanu with chattering teeth and shaking knees. A senseless dread tore at his heart that the soldiers would fraternize with the peasants and butcher him and his companions.

The crowds of peasants suddenly began to waver, like still water rippled by a breeze coming from nowhere. It swayed to and fro, but the tumult of howls gave it a warlike aspect: 'We don't want any more landlords! . . . Have you come to kill us? . . . You

soldiers can't frighten us! . . . The boyars have mocked us enough! Buggar off! Don't fire on us, brothers! . . .'

The prefect stood rooted to the spot, staring at the mob and muttering incessantly: 'Keep calm, gentlemen, keep calm . . .'

Chief prosecutor Grecescu remained several paces behind, and the major, hardly able to curb his impatience, tickled the horse's flanks with his spurs, making it prance and sidestep.

Suddenly Nistor Mucenicu's Anghelina sprang out from the crowd of peasants, dishevelled, her kerchief falling down her back, her child in her arms.

She approached Baloleanu, shrieking and cursing in a desperate voice.

Anton, the village madman, as if wanting to protect her, ran after her and pulled her back, shouting: 'Don't listen to this woman, she's beside herself with worry, and doesn't know what she's saying! . . . Get away, Anghelina! Shut up and let me tell them what God's been bidding me! . . . The hour of judgment has come and men must know the truth! . . . Don't stand there scowling, brothers, your rifles pointed towards your unfortunate brethren! Turn your arms against the devil who sent you to kill the innocent and to . . .'

His words poured forth like a stream of sparks ready to ignite anything encountered on the way, and his voice rose masterfully over the clamour of the crowd as if he were an exceptional singer accompanied by giant barbaric chorus.

In front of the noisy rabble, the soldiers stood motionless on both sides of the road, black and cold like machines of flesh. Only their eyes flickered burningly in their tanned faces.

On the high road, between the two walls of soldiers, like a gate opening upon the nether world, Baloleanu the prefect, the chief prosecutor and Major Tănăsescu, scuttled to and fro, and in the background the carriage with its two horses and the main body of the troops stood still in their marching column with the battery in the rear.

'What are we going to do? What are we going to do?' shouted the prefect nervously, crumpling the government's appeal in his right hand. 'Major, what are we going to do? . . . Mr Grecescu?'

'The ruffians have gone mad!' exclaimed the major, turning his horse to right and left, as if on parade. 'They are capable of attacking the troops, you'll see, sir!'

'But gentlemen, we must read the appeal!' said Baloleanu, at an utter loss, his eyes fixed on the crowd of furious peasants, which seemed to be drawing nearer, although it stood its ground in the same attitude of defiance. 'What do you say, chief prosecutor?'

'We mustn't lose our heads,' answered the terrified Toma Grecescu. 'We must abide by the law, sir!'

'Bugler, bugler!' bawled Tănăsescu. 'Where are you, damn fool? Stay close to me, d'you understand?'

The battalion bugler, a sergeant, galloped up, his bugle resting on his right knee as prescribed by the regulations.

'Here, sir!'

Tănăsescu turned his back. He heard Anton's words and they angered him more than anything else, as if they had been a personal insult. He thought of rushing at him and slaying him in front of the multitude to set an example to anyone who should dare to defy the troops. He found himself, however, almost rating the prefect: 'Sir, can't you hear them inciting the troops under my command to disobedience and rebellion? I must take measures, sir! I've got the entire responsibility for the safety of the troops, sir!'

'Major, I won't have you raising your voice!' shouted Baloleanu, suddenly furious. 'You are under my orders, not I under yours!'

In the meantime Anghelina, who had not stopped screaming for a single moment, began to run up and down in front of the soldiers, holding her child and vulgarly exposing her buttocks: 'Shame upon you! Are you soldiers or robbers? Shame! I'm not afraid of your guns! Look! fire at this if you dare! Fire! . . . Why don't you fire? . . . Look here, here!'

Tănăsescu, seeing her, brandished his riding crop again: 'Look at the devil's slut, how she's mocking the troops! God damn her! Seize her, men!'

Not one, in the wall of soldiers, budged an inch, as if it were of steel, whereupon, from the rebellious crowd, more shouts broke forth: 'Don't let them kill her! Come on, lads. At them!'

Here and there a daring group ran towards the line of soldiers, while others threw clods of earth or stones. The major's horse, hit by a stray stone, reared in fright.

'Are you waiting for the robbers to massacre us?' shouted Tănăsescu to the chief prosecutor. 'Can't you see they've begun to attack us?'

Then, in a voice of command: 'Bugler, sound!'

The next moment the air was rent by the brazen sound of the bugle. The bugler's horse pricked its ears every time the sergeant's cheek reddened and swelled out.

'In the name of the law . . .'

The prosecutor's dry, frightened words were not heard by the prefect. Only the sound of the threatening and ruthless bugle flashed above the heads of the people like a whip of flame. While the bugle was sounding, Major Tănăsescu lifted his riding crop with a curt command. Two hundred muzzles pointed with the same jerky movement towards the peasants. The wild vociferations ceased a moment, as if cut off by the sweep of a sword, only to break forth again more tumultuously.

'They're not allowed to fire! . . . Don't be afraid, Uncle! . . . Come on, lads, they won't fire! . . . Look, shame on you, Anghelina's braver than you are!'

Then several harsh commands resounded, grating like a rusty saw. The wall of soldiers executed the orders with the same jerky, automatic movement. The muzzles, with a white streak of sunlight glinting on each, were raised at the same moment shoulder high, fingers pulled the triggers simultaneously and the volley filled the skies with a sharp crackle.

When, with the same automatic gesture, the soldiers lowered their arms and reloaded, cries of fear arose from the crowd of peasants. The people felt caught up in an oncoming panic as if a hurricane swept the plain.

'They've fired over us!' Petre bawled, his eyes starting out of his head. 'Don't be afraid, brothers! . . . Stand your ground! . . . Don't be afraid, brothers! . . . Stand your ground! . . . Don't flee, men! . . . Don't run! . . . Forwards, lads! . . . At them! . . . Let's take their rifles and bullets!'

The sheet of bullets with its rattle seemed to have cleared the horizon of the noises polluting it; a moment of stupendous and painful silence followed. A vast dread seemed to have rarefied and dispersed the atmosphere, so that over the surface of the earth an immense void alone remained, to torment their souls. In this hollow silence, Petre's voice fell like a boiling, searing rain. Suddenly a howl went up from all throats, setting the heavens ablaze, more tremendous even than the noise of the rifles. Then the voices clashed together in clamour, troubled and stirred like a pool lashed by hail stones.

'Major!' shouted the prefect, his hat on the back of his head, his face the colour of putty. 'The peasants are attacking us! Can't you see? Prosecutor!'

It seemed to him that the insane crowd was about to rush at the army. Fright caught at his heart, but he was at the same time suffocated by a terrible hatred of the major, who was letting him be butchered by the crowd of rebels.

Major Tănăsescu heard nothing more, he was so exasperated, particularly because of the prefect, who, with his cowardly delays, had put him in a situation in which he had had to bear the insults and even the blows of the peasants.

'Bugler,' shouted the major, 'why don't you sound the bugle, you fool? Go on, bugler, let the prefect see! It's not a question of politics here! They want to drink our blood, the thieves! Mr Prefect! Do you see, Mr Prefect?'

The horse was turning in a circle, maddened by the cries from the throng of peasants. The bugle split the air persistently like a knife twisted in a fresh wound.

Dazed by the sound, a group of peasants with cudgels, pitchforks and scythes started towards the line of soldiers as if defending themselves against wolves.

Major Tănăsescu lifted his riding crop. Two sharp orders were stressed by two simple rhythmic metallic clanks. Then, at very brief intervals, only a short word could be heard, rapped out in sharp tones: '... aim! ... fire!'

The mob of peasants stumbled as if each had received a blow in the chest, a moment only, as long as the volley rattled and until the rifles, their muzzles smoking, came back to the horizontal position. The bugle sounded ceaselessly, brazenly. The echo of the shots, the whistling of the bullets had not died away, when drops of blood and cries of pain spurted from the crowd of peasants. Bodies fell to the ground, writhing in agony, like crushed worms, tearing at the earth with their nails and with their teeth: 'Oh God! ... They've killed me, oh mother! ... Oh, friends! They've shot me, friends! ...'

At that moment, the multitude of peasants turned, including in their flight the few who had not lost their nerve. Fear with its countless claws had gripped the groups shattered by the soldiers' fire, impelling them to rush madly towards the village.

Major Tănăsescu, his eyes like steel, the muscles of his face slightly contracted, reined in his bay. Close to him the bugler puffed out his cheeks like mechanical bellows, swaying the bugle. His horse, its neck curved, its head plunged down, was chewing the bit, covering it with grey bubbles of foam. Further on, the prefect, stiff-legged in the middle of the road, was saying, his eyes wandering to the prosecutor, who seemed to be listening, but not to hear: 'We must keep calm and spill no innocent blood ...'

He knew he was speaking about blood, he wanted to avoid the word, and the word again came to his lips, setting his mouth on fire, like a rush of blood.

The major's riding crop rose again, his sharp voice making itself heard above the sound of the bugle, the rifles repeated the same jerky movements and the shots rattled with the same prolonged rat-tat.

'Major, major!' shouted the prefect, unable to move. 'A blood-bath ...'

He stopped, feeling the acrid taste of blood in his mouth, the smell itself seemed to be pricking his nostrils. Tănăsescu turned his head towards him but gave no answer, throwing him only a disdainful glance. On the other hand, however, he rapped out commands which set the wall of soldiers in motion.

The peasants dashed away madly, howling, jostling and stepping on each other. They crowded along the road, but many dispersed through the gardens and the yards of the houses on the outskirts of

the village, each in a desperate haste to disappear and get out of the way of the bullets. In the field, about a dozen bodies remained, some writhing with pain and moaning, others rigid in death. Anghelina lay motionless in the ditch, face upwards, hit in the forehead; the child in her dead arms crying and stretching out its bare little hands as if trying to tear itself away from its mother's breast. Not far away an old man writhed over a dead lad, his face twisted with fear. Chirilă Păun, motionless in the death agony, vomited at each rattle a stream of blackish blood, which stuck to his beard, his neck and his chest, clotting into thick rivulets. Only the bodies of the peasants who were dead or dying remained to mark with white patches the rich earth of Amara, while those who had been lightly wounded stumbled away or dragged themselves among the other fugitives, leaving a trail of blood.

'Don't run away brothers! Stop! God curse you . . .'

Petre was howling at the top of his voice, as he had been doing from the beginning, but he too was dragged along by the crowd helplessly, like a leaf borne on the rushing waters of a torrent which has broken its dam. Ilie Cîrlan, proudly clutching his unloaded rifle, panted along close to Petre, disheartened by the latter's despair. Further away, Nicolae Dragoş was thrusting right and left to get nearer to Petre to exchange a few words. But the terrified crowd had caught them all up irresistibly in the same disorderly rush for shelter from death, which had whistled by the ears of each of them.

A detachment had started after the fugitives along the high road strewn with corpses. In front, a compact line of sharpshooters advanced at the ready, covering the road from one ditch to the other. On each flank there was a platoon in marching column, and between them Major Tănăsescu accompanied by the bugler. Now and then the major would rap out a command, the troops would halt, the rifles would fire and then the march continued down the village street, between the seemingly deserted cottages.

Tănăsescu observed that at each volley a greater or lesser number of the fugitives rolled over on the ground as if they had stumbled against each other, that some of them tried to rise and then crumpled up and remained motionless. But the peasants' flight irritated him, as if they were cowards or as if he wanted a show of opposition to justify the firing. He swore continuously between his teeth to soothe his nerves, then again gave the order. ' . . . Halt! . . . Aim! . . . Fire!'

The main body of the troops remained on the outskirts of the village, waiting for the patrol to clear the ground. Baloleanu and the chief prosecutor had also remained behind, close to their carriage. The prefect could no longer recall how things had happened, but

he felt deeply hurt that the major had forsaken him in order to pursue the peasants and had left him there, a laughing stock, although the power and responsibility were his. He began to tell the prosecutor that the major had exceeded his command and that he, Baloleanu would allow no one to encroach on his authority, because the pacification of the rising was a delicate procedure and demanded calm and tact, not a blood bath. The pop-eyed prosecutor nodded approvingly, jumping every time he heard a new volley.

'... Halt! ... Aim! ... Fire!' yelled Major Tănăsescu, while the prefect remained in torment outside the village.

The group of fugitives had diminished to a third of its number at the most. Some had fallen under the rain of bullets and many had taken refuge in different yards, preferably their own, when they reached their cottages, to escape pursuit. Even Nicolae Dragoș, seeing that it was impossible to get through to Petre and that any further opposition was useless, thought of hiding when he reached his parents' house. But the surge bore him forward and only after having passed the house was he able to tear himself from the crowd and reach the side of the road. In the ditch he saw Chirilă's Gherghina, all twisted up and covered with blood. It was clear that after having fallen she had been trampled on by the others. He jumped over her crumpled body in an effort to reach the school yard which was nearby. Just as he reached the gate, a new volley sounded.

'They're out to kill us all, God help us!' he thought, and felt a rush of happiness that he, at any rate, had escaped.

Then he felt a burning stab in his back, scarcely more painful than the jab in his cheek, which filled his mouth with hot blood.

'I do believe ...' the thought crossed his mind, but was abruptly cut off by darkness. He slumped down like a sack, hitting his head against the pillar, his hand still outstretched to open the gate.

The dwindling crowd continued to pour down the street, now silent, however, as if afraid to shout or cry out, for fear that their voices should attract the bullets from behind. Only Petre's voice, hoarser and hoarser, never ceased for a moment: 'Don't run away! ... Where are you running to? ... Don't run!'

But he too was running, although nobody was pushing him now. He was ashamed of running, but could not stop, only his voice urged the others to halt, as if he was trying thus to hide his own flight. He knew all was over, and was sad that it had ended so, although it could have finished in no other way. Yet he still felt that perhaps if the people had not taken fright at the first shots, and had rushed at the soldiers, they would have let themselves be disarmed and thus the return of the landlords would have been prevented. Now all was over. All hopes had been crushed, at the cost of blood-

shed. He, who had not been killed by bullets, would be beaten to death or thrown into prison, and instead of receiving land the people would be yoked to the plough like cattle. He at any rate would not wait for pity or mercy, because he knew that even his own fellow-villagers would point him out as the chief instigator.

'Petrică, Petrică, what are we going to do?' shouted Ilie Cîrlan next to him, his face like wax, his shirt stained with blood.

'I'll not give in, Ilie, let them kill me!' answered Petre, without looking at Ilie, as if he were ashamed.

When they reached the space in front of the inn, at the cross-roads, they stopped. The crowd had dispersed. A few groups were still running, some along the road to Vaideei, others towards Ruginoasa. He remained alone with Ilie Cîrlan, who asked again: Petrică, tell me, what are we going to do; I'm not going to leave you?

'We'll make peace, Ilie!' murmured Petre, seeing him covered in blood. 'Where are you wounded, boy, your shirt's soaked in blood?'

'Perhaps in this shoulder, I don't seem to feel it any more,' he answered, looking at him with a proud smile.

'Filthy sods, bandits!'

Petre had a loaded rifle, taken from one of the watchmen of Cosma, the lease-holder. He held it by the muzzle like a cudgel. Deep sorrow overcame him, stifling his heartbeats. The thought crossed his mind to run home, like all the others had done, but he was ashamed in front of the boy next to him, who had such boundless faith in him.

'Stop then, Petrică, let's show we want peace, not to be killed uselessly!' shouted Ilie joyously.

He took off his torn and bloody shirt and attached it as a sign of peace to the muzzle of the rifle to which he had shown such pride, lifting it up so that the soldiers should see it when they were still far away. The rifle was heavy for his wounded arm and the muzzle with the shirt attached to it wavered as if blown by the wind.

For a time they remained so. Silence reigned all round, nothing stirred, the village seemed dead. The door of the inn was shut. Petre muttered and ground his teeth, waiting for who knows what miracle. Then from downhill, in the lane near Iuga's manor, he heard old Ioana's voice, peevish as always: 'Chickabiddy, chick, chick, chick . . .'

'Mother Ioana is calling her hens even now, Petrică, d'you hear?' Ilie said, glad to hear the voice of a human being in the painful silence.

'As if she's got any other cares,' mumbled Petre dully.

After a pause, only interrupted by the old woman's clucks the approaching soldiers, with the major on horseback in their midst,

could be seen more clearly. Petre looked at them distrustfully, almost as if he were counting each step. Suddenly, a prolonged bugle note could be heard like a warning, and immediately afterwards Petre heard snatches of the command: '... Halt! ... Aim! ... Fire!'

Ilie began to wave the white flag more strongly, so that the soldiers should be sure to see it. The rattle of the volley seemed even more deafening. The bloody shirt with the rifle dropped down sharply like a flag-staff dropping the colours. Ilie crumpled to the ground, gasping: 'Oh Lord!'

Two bullets had hit Petre also, but he did not feel them.

'Even the peace we offer them is not enough,' he thought, feeling sudden indignation that the soldiers had shot down the symbol of peace. 'Then ...'

The soldiers had automatically continued to advance. Petre, as if remembering only then that he had a rifle, shouldered it and fired back eagerly. The rifle went off with a dull crack. After a second, the order resounded again: 'Halt! ... Aim! ... Fire!'

Before the last word could be heard, the volley rattled, Petre remained standing, his spent gun in his hand, saying defiantly: 'Christ! You bloody bastards!'

First he fell on his knees. Splotches of blood appeared on his shirt.

'Fire! ... Fire! ... Fire!' shouted the major furiously. •

The shots crackled like a child's rattle swinging by itself. Petre felt his head become as heavy as lead. Letting it drop upon his breast he could no longer maintain his balance and rolled over, groaning with a final outburst of rage: 'Pigs'.

Further downhill, old Ioana in the middle of the street, called more impatiently as the shots got nearer: 'Chickabiddies, chick, chick, chick.'

In the opposite ditch the hens went on pecking, heedless of her calls. Anxious that they should not be killed, the old woman ceaselessly called them, throwing now and then a lowering glance towards the inn, whence came the sound of firing: 'Mother's little chicks ... Damn you and your firing ... Chickabiddies ...'

Then suddenly she twisted round angrily, grumbling: 'The devil take ...'

She fell in a heap, writhing and moving her lips without a sound.

The carriage with the prefect and the chief prosecutor, escorted by the battalion bugler, whom the major had sent back with instructions to the main body of the troops, stopped on the space outside the inn, which was surrounded by soldiers with fixed bayonets.

'Major, please, I thought that ...' stammered Baloleanu, horror-

struck at the sight of the corpses and wounded he had met on his way.

Major Tănăsescu, on horseback, approached the carriage, and his hand to his cap, announced triumphantly: 'Sir, I have the honour to report that peace and order have been restored in Amara.'

Several paces away Baloleanu saw the bodies of Ilie Cîrlan, bare to the waist, and Petre riddled by bullets, with the white shirt between them, unfurled like a fallen flag. He stammered fearfully, turning his head the other way: 'Yes . . . peace and order . . . Very good, Major! . . . Thank you!'

Chapter Twelve

SUNSET

I

Until noon Grigore waited impatiently at Costești, listening to all the stories about the events in Amara, the manner of his father's death and that of Nadina. He heard it all quietly, without tears, to the secret amazement of Titu Herdelea, who wondered at his self-control.

'I must inform Gogu!' young Iuga said finally.

He went to the post office, Titu his only companion. He felt he wanted to be rid of the others, as if they were enemies, bringing him all this sad news, and was greatly in need of solitude and tranquillity. Coming out of the post office, he said to Herdelea, quietly and sadly, as if speaking to his own heart: 'I would never have thought a man could bear so much!'

Finally, after lunch, he told Isbășescu to procure a carriage to take them to Amara. The book-keeper tried to convince him that it would be wiser to wait until the next day, but Grigore gave him such a reproachful look, that he did not dare insist.

At about two o'clock they were on their way, Isbășescu up in front, his heart quaking. In an effort to bolster up his courage, and seeing that Grigore was disinclined to listen to him, he started a whispered colloquy with the driver about the atrocities committed by the insurgent peasants. His listener, who greatly feared that this trip would be the death of him, regretted having been tempted by the big sum he had been offered to convey them.

In Vlăduța, in front of the burnt-out manor, the road was blocked by a large crowd of crouching peasants, guarded by soldiers with fixed bayonets. A sergeant came to meet the carriage.

'Go back! . . . Go back! . . . You can't pass here!'

All their attempts to persuade him proved futile. Grigore had to get down and see the officer before he could obtain permission to go on. From some distance off he could hear the voice of Colonel Ștefănescu raging at the peasants: 'Which of you set fire to it, you villains? . . . You don't want to say? . . . Come on, out with it,

otherwise I'll beat you till you're all dead! . . . Come on, now, which of you stole?"

Recognizing Grigore, the colonel began to complain bitterly, pointing at the ruins: 'Look, sir, what is left of my life's work! . . . Look what the thieves have done! . . . Don't they all deserve to be shot without mercy; when they themselves had no mercy on my white hair? . . . I thought surely they would not pillage absolutely everything, that's why I hurried back, and - look what I found!'

His voice trembled with grief and anger.

'Get out of the way! Let the carriage pass!' shouted the second lieutenant, after old Ștefănescu had unloaded his bitterness to young Iuga.

The peasants attempted to rise to make way, but the officer, frightened, roared: 'Down! Down! . . . Private, strike that man! . . . Get moving, private!'

The carriage went on its way on through Babaroaga and Gliganu, as far as Lespezi, where it halted for a longer time. Grigore, without acknowledging it, dreaded seeing Nadina's corpse more than that of his father. He had not seen her since the charity concert, and it pained his heart to think of her as she had been then, sinuously twisting in the Apache dance. That was how he remembered her. Now, in the church, standing in front of the bier on which her cold body had lain for several days, wrapped in a common sheet, he saw that image once again, but this time warm, bright and beautiful, as if he had never parted with her for one moment. He did not lift the corner of the sheet for fear of destroying for ever the image he had cherished, which had given him all the suffering and joy of love. He stayed a long time alone, seated at the head of the bier, his head in his hands. Several prayer-books lay on the seat, very old, with wooden covers and soiled pages. The heavy smell of death choked but did not disturb him. His thoughts wandered at random. He alone, he decided, had the right and obligation to see to her funeral, for their divorce, although it had been announced, had not been recorded. It had been her destiny to die in the country, after all perhaps it was a punishment, or an irony of fate, she had hated the country so much. If all this had happened just a fortnight later, he thought, he would have been a mere stranger, even beside her corpse.

Titu Herdelea had left the church long ago, for he could not stand the atmosphere. An officer outside told him that terrible things must have happened in Amara, because shots had been heard even at this distance. Grigore, learning this later, nevertheless wanted to go on. But the officer stopped him. He had sent a patrol to report, and until its return he could permit no passage or he would lay himself open to severe punishment. Only in the late

afternoon did they start off towards Amara, but Grigore did not return to the church.

At the edge of Amara village, and in its lanes, the corpses lay where they had fallen. Here and there a dying man would groan, or still writhed. The driver constantly pointed with his whip: 'Look, there's a dead one! . . . And there . . . That one looks as if he's still breathing, see?'

Isbășescu recognized Chirilă Păun, and then Nicolae Dragoș . . . Titu Herdelea exclaimed in horror: 'There must have been a huge battle here!'

Grigore alone remained silent, gazing unseeingly ahead. A patrol stopped them before the church, and another in front of the inn. When they reached the manor, they left the carriage in the road outside. Grigore, Titu and Isbășescu walked in under the great arch with its dovecote where the white birds billed and cooed nostalgically. The lawn and paths were destroyed as if herds of wild cattle had passed over them. The silence was so great that the driver's long yawn could be heard from the road, followed by the jingle of the horses' bells as one of them shook off his weariness. The walls of the villa that were still standing rose blackly against the violet sky of sunset.

Grigore looked carefully around, as one in a strange land turning his head to right and left, but without pausing at the ruins. Soon, Leonte Bumbu, the steward appeared, frightened and unable to believe his eyes, while from the old manor came Proșiră, the cook, who started wailing in a hoarse, masculine voice, and rushed to kiss Grigore's hand, filling it with tears. Young Iuga put several questions, and listened stiffly to the answers as if he had heard them already, or was not interested.

In the old manor porch stood Captain Lache Grădinaru, who had been left in the village with his company to maintain order and be ready for any emergency. After he had expressed sincere condolences to Grigore in artificial ceremonious sentences, the captain said that Prefect Baloleanu and Major Tănăsescu had crossed themselves in front of the mortal remains of the late Miron Iuga, and had then gone on to Ruginoasa, but hoped to return tomorrow. Grigore thanked him with equal formality, though he was ashamed of his words as he uttered them, cutting the last sentence short and abruptly going into the house.

His father seemed to sleep, with the candle at his head. Grigore looked at him for several minutes, knelt down as if in prayer, and stayed so for some time, finally stretching his neck to kiss the cold, ash-grey hand with its blue nails. It was then that his tears broke out in a flood, falling on the crossed hands of the dead man in shining, oily patches. Grigore rose and took out his handkerchief to

wipe the dead man's hands, but before unfolding it changed his mind, and buried his own face in it. Recovering himself after some moments, he went to the next room, followed by the others, except the captain, who had withdrawn discreetly so as not to intrude into his grief.

'Leonte, you must go to Costești at once!' said Grigore in a shaking voice, but nevertheless quietly, as if his tears had brought him back to himself.

The steward was given the task of bringing back two coffins and the necessary items for the funeral, that very evening. One coffin must be left at Lespezi, where the priest would see that Nadina's body was laid in it to be transported here the next morning. Grigore considered this to be most urgent, extremely urgent, because the corpses needed rest.

The next day, Monday, in the morning, Grigore went with Titu Herdelea to see the destruction for himself, both in Amara and Ruginoasa. Ichim, the driver, told them on the way how many and who had been shot during the fighting at the edge of the village.

In Ruginoasa they met the chaise carrying Prefect Baloleanu, who had spent the night with the Chief Prosecutor, Grecșcu, at the Ghica Villa, in Izvoru, which by a miracle had escaped the fury of the peasants. The condolences were long and tearful. Baloleanu then enthusiastically related his pacifying activities. He was moved and full of admiration at his own heroism, painting in lurid colours the extraordinary dangers which had threatened his life and wondering at his own narrow escapes. He congratulated himself on managing to re-establish quiet so quickly, and almost without bloodshed.

'My poor Melanie! If she knew what I have been through!' he sighed emotionally. 'Only my cool head and my proverbial tact could have worked this miracle, my dear Grigoriță! . . . But my work is not finished yet. The heaviest burden is only just being tackled. It is not enough to combat the evil, you must pull it out by the root to prevent its revival! Isn't that right, Mr Prosecutor?'

2

Major Tănăsescu had returned to Amara late in the evening, accompanied only by his A.D.C. and the detachment's trumpeter. He could have slept in Izvoru as well, but he wanted to prove to the Prefect that order was so complete that he could travel unescorted through the rebellious villages. In addition, he wanted to conduct the preliminary investigations in Amara, personally – it being the nest of the whole revolt.

From early morning Ion Pravilă had waited in the yard of the village hall, trembling and consulting the crier about his clerk Chiriță Dumitrescu, who had been hiding somewhere for two days in terror of the people. He might be needed now.

'Are you the mayor of these thieves?' asked the major, catching sight of him.

Pravilă was hardly able to answer before Tănăsescu cuffed him on the head a couple of times so that he saw green stars and shouted: 'Now I'll show you what happens in a revolution! I'll see that you remember it, all of you!'

Last night he had given orders that the dead should be left where they lay, to serve as examples to the living. Now he instructed the chastened mayor to identify the bodies under the control of a sergeant, after which they were to be carried to the cemetery and buried at a time he would decide later. Captain Lache Grădinaru had been given the task of seeing that all villagers without exception, including the women and children, should speedily be brought to the garden and yard of the village hall for an investigation.

Then together with the A.D.C. and the bashful young second lieutenant, he worked out a methodical plan of action for promptly identifying the murderers of Nadina and Miron Iuga, the criminals who had mutilated Platamonu's son; the incendiaries of the manors; those who had struck and disarmed the police; those who had stolen, and finally those who had joined, in insulting the troops.

'Before doing anything else, we'll send someone to Lespezi and Gliganu to bring over the principal thieves from there too, so that we can confront them all, and judge them together with the local ones!' decided Major Tănăsescu, impatiently interrupting himself.

Some time later Inspector Corbuleanu, who had come to reinstate the police, presented himself. The major was glad to see him, he needed them, for they knew the people and the district. Nobody in this criminal village inspired confidence. If even the old priest had got mixed up with the rebels, and been shot along with them, in whom could he place his trust? (In actual fact, Father Nicodim had gone to boyar Miron to read the prayers for the dead, and on his way back from the Manor, his cross wrapped in his stole, had been killed in the road near his home by a stray bullet).

Sergeant Boiangiu found Didina in his pillaged house, somewhat more haggard than before but quite happy. They embraced, she weeping for a while and telling him how lucky she had been with Mother Ioana, who had hidden her in the attic of the cottage, feeding and caring for her, as otherwise if the peasants had found her they would certainly have slaughtered her. The sergeant also let fall a few tears, and then hurried to do his duty at the village hall.

At about nine o'clock, when the chaise arrived with the prefect

and the chief prosecutor, the investigation was in full swing. The shouts and lamentations of the victims from among the crowd of peasants which filled the road, yard and garden of the village hall, could be heard as far as the inn. Cordons of soldiers encircled them to see that nobody got away before being examined.

No spectacular results had been obtained so far. Two groups of soldiers, equipped with canes and sticks were beating up the peasants indiscriminately, taking it in turns so as not to get too tired. The peasants yelled and pleaded for mercy, but were reluctant to confess to crime or to denounce the main criminals. Thanks only to Sergeant Boiangiu the names of the seven who had struck and disarmed the police had been discovered, Serafim Mogoş and Trifon Guju being among them.

'Why did you strike the sergeant, you villain?' shouted the major, with bloodshot eyes. 'How did you dare to lift your hand to him, you ruffian?'

'Well . . .' Serafim Mogoş muttered quietly, looking directly into the major's eyes, realizing that any answer would be useless.

Tănăsescu, breathing heavily, went at him with his whip until he was covered with blood.

'Why did you strike, you villain? . . . Why did you? . . . Why? . . . Why?'

Serafim Mogoş suffered the blows unblinkingly, and without uttering a sound. His expression infuriated the major, who considered it insolent.

'Corporal!' raved Tănăsescu exhausted. 'A hundred strokes for this bandit! Instantly! . . . And after that put him in chains!'

Trifon Guju was missing. Somebody said that he had been shot by the old boyar, and now lay in bed at home. He was hastily carried in, his whole face one blackened wound, and lay groaning on the ground.

'Up! Stand up, you villain!' the major raged, kicking him in the ribs with the toe of his boot.

The peasant got up. His eyes were swollen, and shut, and he swayed as if he would collapse at any moment.

'Why did the boyar shoot you, you thief?' the officer demanded. 'You raised your hand to him, didn't you? . . . You wanted to kill him, didn't you? . . . You led the assassins!'

Trifon groaned unintelligibly.

'And why did you tear the rifle out of the sergeant's hand? . . . Why did you strike him? . . . Come on, bandit, out with it!'

With his whip he lashed at the peasant's head, which was pitted with raw wounds. The man let out a piercing scream, as if his flesh were being torn off, and collapsed like a log. The major, infuriated, trampled him underfoot, repeatedly yelling 'villain' and 'thief'.

Suddenly, he withdrew a few paces and ordered in a cold, cutting voice: 'Sergeant! . . . You, yes! . . . Take six men! . . . Get this swine out to the back of the garden! . . . Shoot him there! . . . Shoot him! . . . You understand, sergeant!'

'Yes sir! Right away, sir!' answered the stolid, dark sergeant, clicking his heels as if a shudder shook him.

The soldiers seized Trifon, and dragged him through the dense crowd of peasants. With a supreme thirst for life, Trifon Guju begged, groaning: 'Forgive me . . . Forgive me . . .'

He disappeared with the soldiers. They left a bitter silence in their wake, broken only by the crack of the whip with which Major Tănăsescu lashed the air furiously. Some moments passed, and the whip flickered more and more frequently. Then the muffled roar of the volley burst out from the back of the garden, reverberating briefly, without an echo.

'Next lot!' shouted the major suddenly, tearing through the mesh of silence which had been disturbed by the shots. 'How dare you lay your filthy hands on the police?'

The peasants began to swear and wail that they were innocent, and had not even been present when it had happened. Major Tănăsescu was breathing heavily. He had put on weight recently, and his stomach was getting somewhat protuberant. A doctor had told him that he had a fatty heart; in any case he tired very easily. To avoid endangering his health with these scum, he ordered that the remaining five offenders should receive a hundred strokes each. His instructions were just being carried out, the peasants vying with each other as to who yelled loudest as the blows fell, when the prefect's carriage drew up in the street.

As the beating continued, a corporal counting each stroke out loud to avoid any error, Major Tănăsescu complained to the prefect and the chief prosecutor about the stubbornness of these villains, who would not confess or denounce the main criminals. The cries of the peasants irritated and annoyed Baloleanu. After the corporal had pronounced the hundredth stroke, and the peasants had been locked in the office, the prefect, in an effort to regain his poise, shouted to the crowd, who knelt heads on the ground before him that their crimes had horrified the whole world, and that only repentance and confession would lessen the retribution . . . As if at a command, the hundreds of heads were raised in one movement, as though their owners wanted to rise, and a prolonged murmur, like the echo of a dying storm, was heard: 'We're sorry . . .'

Baloleanu stiffened with terror, seeing the movement of the crowd as a threat of a new revolt. The same sudden fear gripped the prosecutor, the major, all the officers and even the soldiers. Only

Sergeant Boiangiu kept his head, calling out quickly: 'Down! . . . Down! . . . To the ground! . . . Down!'

Immediately the sergeant's order was taken up by several others and the soldiers began to belabour the bent backs to right and left, repeating fearfully: 'Down! . . . Down!'

The prefect gave up any idea of continuing his admonitions, and the investigation passed to Toader Strimbu, whom Boiangiu indicated as Nadina's murderer.

'How did you kill her? Tell us!' said the chief prosecutor.

'Why, sir, I didn't kill anybody! I'm innocent!' the peasant answered, his face like putty.

'Then who did?'

'I don't know, sir! Maybe it was Smaranda's Petrică, because he went into the manor before me, but I didn't kill her!'

'Let Smaranda's Petrică come forward!' called the chief prosecutor calmly.

'He's dead . . . dead!' several voices replied.

Major Tănăsescu's anger boiled over uncontrollably. This peasant had the most infuriating cunning. He hurled himself upon his victim.

'Why don't you say, you villain? . . . Why did you kill her, you devil! . . . Why did you insult and outrage her? . . . You lusted after the body of a fine lady, did you, you vile scum?'

Toader Strimbu, shielding his face from the lash of the whip, screamed like a woman: 'Oh my Lord! . . . Oh Lord! . . . It wasn't me, Mr Major! I forgive me, I'm innocent!'

At that moment a cart drawn by four oxen passed by, carrying the simple coffin which enclosed all that remained of Nadina. Behind walked the priest from Lespezi in his best vestments, the cross in one hand and the censer in the other. The weak, old chanter intoned the prayers for the dead, peering curiously at the kneeling people filling the yard, and especially at the standing figures of the investigators.

Silence fell as the cart passed. Everyone bared his head, and Baloleanu muttered in sad indignation: 'Poor woman, poor woman! . . . What a foul crime!'

Hearing the prefect's indignant voice, the chief prosecutor cried to Toader Strimbu: 'What did that gracious, beautiful lady do to you that you should kill her, you madman?'

'I didn't kill her!' the peasant asserted stubbornly.

The groups of peasants now arrived from Lespezi, escorted by soldiers. Grecescu, the chief prosecutor, ambitious to nail down the murderer of Madame Iuga, immediately turned to the newcomers, demanding that they tell him the truth as the murder had taken place in their village and they must know who had committed it,

Ileana spoke up instantly: 'Toader killed the lady, sir, after he'd had his satisfaction out of her . . . I saw him going into the manor, and I heard him boasting afterwards, and telling Ilie Cîrlan to go and satisfy himself too, before she was cold . . . Matei Dulmanu will tell you the same! He was there with Smaranda's Petrică when I took the lady out of the house, dead, seeing that Pavel Tunsu had set fire to the car . . .'

'I didn't kill her, she's telling silly lies!' persisted Toader Strîmbu, but without looking at Ileana.

'Toader, the girl isn't lying,' Matei Dulmanu said reproachfully. 'Why don't you confess, once you've done it? Why do you try to shift the blame on to others?'

'Well, if I did, you'd better tell them how you cracked the German's head, Matei!' Toader muttered darkly.

'I shan't hide anything when my turn comes to be questioned by the boyars!' Matei said, clearly and fearlessly.

The prosecutor listened with a satisfied air, glancing occasionally at the prefect and the major, to see if they had noticed how cleverly he had proceeded, and how he had succeeded in getting the peasants to talk.

'I've had a lot of sinners pass through my hands, but never one more vilely cynical than this wretch!' he said to Baloleanu.

Major Tănăsescu tugged at his moustache in an effort to regain his control, afraid he would burst a vein from so much nervous strain. He vented his feelings by setting on Toader with his fists and his whip, covering him in blood, throwing him down and trampling him underfoot. Wearying, he ordered a corporal to continue with the stick until the peasant's bones were broken. The yells of the victim became groans, which gradually weakened into grunts.

'Sergeant!' the major shouted finally. 'Take him, to . . . At the back of the yard! . . . Shoot him! . . . Quickly, now, quickly!'

His order roused Strîmbu from his coma as if cold water had been thrown over him and he dragged himself to the officer's feet, groaning: 'Forgive me, Mr Major . . . My children will be orphaned . . . Have . . .'

'Take him, sergeant!' Tănăsescu raved, recoiling from the peasant's touch. 'Come on, get hold of him!'

In the pause before the rifle burst, Titu Herdelea appeared in the yard. As Grigore was busy with the preparations for the funeral, he had felt it better not to bother him with his presence. Hearing the shots from the back of the yard, he asked Baloleanu about them in a low voice. The prefect, wishing to exhibit his efficiency, answered casually: 'Oh, nothing . . . Madame Iuga's murderer being executed . . .'

Matei Dulmanu, on confessing his guilt, was put under arrest by

Grecescu to go for trial. The major protested at this: 'Excuse me, sir! Before the trial a sound thrashing is more efficacious! . . . Corporal, count him out twenty-five!'

As Matei Dulmanu was receiving the blows without a murmur, Tănăsescu explained to the civilian gentlemen that only a beating would put fear into these villains; prison was just a holiday for them, and anyway, apart from the civil investigation, it was necessary to take these drastic measures against all of them because the peasants had dared to rise against the army. Titu Herdelea had an answer ready on his lips, but held his peace, seeing that Baloleanu and Grecescu, who should have spoken up, received the officer's wordy explanation without comment.

'Pavel Tunsu! . . . Which is he? . . . Come here!' the prosecutor shouted.

Pavel rose to his feet, trembling with fear lest he, too, should be shot. He stammered mechanically, without waiting for any questions: 'I didn't kill anybody . . . I smashed the car and set fire to it, because it had crippled my child but I didn't shed any blood because I have children.'

He considered himself the happiest of all men when, stupefied by the beating, he was thrown among those arrested in the office, crossing himself and giving thanks to God for having had mercy on his children.

In order to sort out the decent men from the evildoers as soon as possible, the chief prosecutor felt it necessary to change the procedure of the investigation, and hear the leading men of the village first. They would know the true miscreants and agitators.

'Now, old fellow, tell us honestly how everything happened and who is guilty!' he said to Lupu Chirițoiu.

'Well, sir, I didn't meddle, because I'm old, and it would not have been suitable for me to . . .'

'Very well, very well, I believe you, but how did this revolt start, and who began it? It didn't just come from heaven, did it?' the prosecutor persisted.

'But it did rather come just like that!' the old man said. 'There was a big wind that took hold of the people and drove them like sheep.'

'Now listen here, old man, we don't want fairy-tales, we haven't time for them!' put in Major Tănăsescu, irritated by the old fellow's meanderings.

After some further replies from Lupu Chirițoiu, the major struck him twice across the face. Old Lupu looked straight into his eyes and said distinctly: 'Well, Mr Major, may the Lord repay you for this insult to my years!'

'What's that? . . . What? . . . You're insolent with me, you old devil?' exclaimed Tănăsescu. 'Corporal, count him out fifty!'

Titu Herdelea stood next to prefect Baloleanu, trembling, while the old man bore the blows in stony silence.

After other elders of the village had been beaten up, Luca Talabă among the worst sufferers, because of his apparently insolent bearing, and Filip Illoasa and Marin Stan had been exposed as plunderers and admitted it, although both were comfortably off, came the turn of Ignat Cercel. On the previous day, after the shooting had died down, Ignat had fastened a white towel on to a stick and placed it at his gate, in order to put himself in the good books of the military, and for it to be seen by the boyars when they passed. The major had, in fact, noticed it with irritation, saying at the time: 'What's this, you villain?' 'Peace, Mr Major!' Ignat had answered humbly. 'Peace, you thief? Whom have you been fighting, you villain? The Rumanian army?' And Ignat had received a thrashing . . . Now the major recognized him.

'You're the one with the white flag and the peace, eh? you thief!'

'Well, sir, Lord bless us, we don't know how to behave properly so as not to make a mistake!' Ignat muttered. 'If the good God chastised us by making us stupid, well . . .'

While the prosecutor, repeatedly interrupted by explosions from the major, was dealing with Ignat Cercel, Ion Pravilă arrived to report that, according to instructions, he had gathered and identified the dead, forty-four of them, that was. The forty-fifth had been Nicodim, the priest, whose body had been taken off the street already by his daughter, Niculina. This sent Major Tănăsescu into another frenzy: how had the daughter of that thieving priest dared to disobey his orders? The mayor froze, awaiting a second drubbing, and in front of the whole village, too.

'Where's the bitch who dared to do this?' the major shouted, his eyes bulging from his head.

Niculina stepped forward, pale, her child clutching her hand. Without a word the major rushed at her with his whip. The woman shrieked and shrank away while the child began to cry: 'Mummy . . . my mummy!'

'My God, my God, help!' screamed Niculina, her cheeks seared by the incessant lashes.

'Corporal!' yelled the major, exhausted. 'Count her out fifty!'

'Oh my God, good people! . . . Oh God!'

The soldiers seized her. Niculina, held face down on the ground by four soldiers, writhed and shrieked like a trodden reptile. Antonel threw himself on his mother with the same cry of horror: 'My mummy! . . . my mummy!'

When the first soldier began to strike, Titu Herdelea, who until then had repeatedly muttered: 'How terrible, how terrible,' so that prefect Baloleanu should hear him, forgot all restraint and

approaching Tănăsescu said, sickened: 'Major, enough! . . . It's unbearable! . . . This is . . .'

The major started back as if he had received a slap in the face.

'What did you say? . . . Who are you . . . What do you want here? . . . How dare you interfere in . . .'

'My name is Titu Herdelea and . . .'

'I don't want to hear anything!' Tănăsescu interrupted, his fists clenched. 'Leave this place immediately, otherwise I shall arrest you and send you off under bayonet guard! . . . Immediately! . . . At once!'

Baloleanu the prefect stood stupefied. He did not disapprove of the major's firm measures with the peasants, for they relieved him of the responsibility of taking the burden upon himself, and he would thus be able to wash his hands of anything that might arise in the future. But an incident with a journalist from Bucharest who was a friend of Grigore Iuga's could create consequences which would be anything but pleasant. Emerging from his daze, he made a friendly intervention in French, with the intention of soothing Tănăsescu who retorted, his rage increasing: 'I cannot permit anybody! . . . Whoever it may be! . . . Even if it's the Lord himself, I cannot permit it!'

Titu, white as a sheet with indignation and emotion, realized that his intervention, human and natural though it might be, had been imprudent. Nevertheless, he did not regret it. In order to avoid any trouble or exposing himself to the risk of arrest, he turned his back. The prefect, desiring to make amends, grasped his hand to detain him: 'Mr Herdelea, please . . . Do me the favour . . . The major will . . .'

'I would rather withdraw, Mr Prefect, than be present at such savageries!' Titu answered, endeavouring to keep his composure.

'I'm very sorry that . . .' Baloleanu murmured, shaking his hand, but nevertheless allowing him to go.

Seeing his departure, Tănăsescu was somewhat mollified. When he had heard that Titu was a journalist, his fury had abated, but he had not allowed this to show, not wishing to appear defeated. Several years ago, when he was stationed at Turnu Severin, he had smacked the face of a local reporter during a drinking bout. The action had resulted in a tremendous hullabaloo; all the Bucharest newspapers had attacked him, and matters had gone so far that he had been summoned in front of the Military Reform Council. But for the fact that this had been noted in his records, he would long ago have been a lieutenant-colonel.

'I cannot permit anyone to hinder me in the execution of my duty!' he now said, raising his voice to keep up the impression of anger. 'I have a responsibility here! We are not playing games, are

we, Mr Prefect? . . . It's easy to issue commands and write from Bucharest, but it is here that these villains have destroyed, plundered, pillaged and murdered!

The moment he turned back to the peasants, his voice hardened again and his fury returned, as if he himself had been insulted and plundered, although he was not a man of property.

'These villages should be blown off the face of the earth with cannon! . . . Even the priest was a thief! . . . Their accursed atrocities are unparalleled! . . . At least they had some shame in other parts, but here they were capable of murdering women and old men . . .'

As Tănăsescu spoke, a peasant, with wild long hair and his face shining, rose and approached, speaking in exalted tones: 'Sir, sir, I see you've begun to kill God's Christian people, refusing to harken to the orders of the voice which trumpets across the skies . . .'

'Down, down!' shouted several zealous privates.

'What orders? . . . What is he talking about? . . .' asked the major, astounded at this brazen behaviour after he had been endeavouring to intimidate them since morning.

'He's an idiot, sir!' explained Sergeant Boiangiu.

'Idiot? . . . Leave him to me, I know this sort of idiocy!' Tănăsescu shouted. 'As a matter of fact, yesterday this villain was leading the rebels, and inciting my men to insubordination . . . I heard him with my own ears! . . . Corporal, count him out as many as he deserves!'

As the soldiers beat him, Anton cried out with joy, as if he did not feel the blows: 'Go on, go on, brothers! . . . For the day of judgment is at hand, it will inevitably come, with the voice of the Lord . . . Beat on, beat on! . . . That's why I stood up, and . . .'

Major Tănăsescu, annoyed that the blows appeared to have no effect, ordered: 'Let him go to the devil, corporal! The idiot!'

Then, turning to the chief prosecutor, he added: 'Well, let's proceed! . . . If you please . . .'

3

Grigore Iuga's heart was torn with remorse and the same thought kept hammering in his brain: 'Perhaps if I had stayed it would not have happened . . .'

At the same time, however, he realized that all remorse was futile, and he had duties to perform. Nadina's body had been seeking rest for five days now, and his father's for three. He felt that the dead had lain neglected for too long, and that their souls, restless and unable to find tranquillity, tortured the living around them,

him above all, who suffered so much and was overcome with remorse.

Yesterday, when he had sent the telegram announcing Nadina's death from Costești to Gogu, he had not thought about the funeral; no material things had then been in his mind. Only in the evening, after he had seen the corpses, had he said to himself that at least Gogu and Eugenia should be at Nadina's funeral and that he must wait for them. Today, however, after he had seen the coffin arrive in the cart, followed by the priest from Lespezi, he suddenly realized that Gogu would not even come to the country for the funeral of his sister, and that in fact this was no time for a pompous funeral, when the villages were writhing in their awakening from their furious folly and the ruins were still smouldering, as did the hearts of the people. At that moment he decided to arrange a simple funeral appropriate to the circumstances. Later on, when true calm returned, they would have a fitting ceremony. From then onwards, the frustration which had gripped his spirit with anguished impotence, so that he could do nothing, and seemed to float in an unsubstantial world, disappeared.

'Listen, Leonte, the funeral will be held this afternoon.' Quietly, as if he were dealing with everyday matters, he gave the steward detailed and precise instructions. Several generations of the Iuga family had been buried near Amara church. The last tomb had been built by Miron Iuga and the body of his wife had now lain there for some time. It was of stone, vaulted and immense, destined to receive his body also when the time came. Nadina's coffin would have room in the tomb, at least provisionally. Because old Nicodim was dead, they would call on the services of the priest from Lespezi who had followed the cart carrying Nadina's body. There would be no need of others.

The service was held in the courtyard. A spring sun shone gaily and the trees budded under one's very eyes. Each coffin was laid in a wagon drawn by four oxen. Behind them, the Manor, with its broken windows seemed like an old man who had wept himself sightless. Opposite, the blackened walls and beams of the villa stood stark against the row of poplars near the road, seeming to have been deliberately designed to provide a frame for the funeral. The beardless priest, clad in his new vestments, his chin trembling, prayed and sang, continually raising his eyes to the blue sky, across which sailed little white clouds, like rows of angels competing to listen to the prayer for the dead. His voice was weak and thin, but soothing, rising like incense vapour into the air and spreading in the morning silence which reigned not only over the Manor but the whole area, while the nasal automatic responses of the chanter lay beneath, mingling with the indifferent, quiet chewing of the

oxen, whose long tails waved rhythmically to drive away imaginary flies.

Grigore Iuga stood next to the rails of the wagon carrying his father's body, with Titu Herdelea alongside like a faithful retainer. Opposite, stretching to the old manor fence, of which only a few posts remained, crowded all the servants, headed by Isbăşescu, with the farm hands at the back. The steward's wife and Profira the cook sobbed frequently, but not noisily, as if shamed by Grigore's composure.

Young Iuga's bloodshot, troubled eyes took in the two coffins at one glance. Both were the same size, and made of the same wood, as if this had been fated long ago. The silence of resignation filled his heart. Many thoughts clashed and drove each other incessantly in his brain, but without forming coherently, blown uselessly hither and thither, as if by a stray wind. In his heart he felt a depression like that caused by a raw wound, still numb from the injury.

He did not even observe that the service had ended, and that they had started for the cemetery. Only in the road did he whisper to Titu Herdelea: 'I think we should have told Baloleanu, too . . . Well, now it's done!'

He followed the second wagon, on which his father's coffin lay. Several paces behind could be heard the steps of the others and the weeping of the women, now louder. In front of the first wagon he saw the priest's vestments glittering, and heard his voice, as if from a great distance.

He was surprised to see the crowd gathered at the village hall. Titu briefly explained what had happened. Cries from within confirmed that the investigation was being continued with the same zeal. As the funeral procession approached, Prefect Baloleanu left the crowded courtyard, followed by Grecescu, the chief prosecutor, Major Tănăsescu, and Corbuleanu, the police inspector. Captain Lache Grădinaru, who would have liked to join them, as one who had known Miron Iuga and enjoyed his hospitality several times, was obliged to continue with the examination of the rebels in the absence of the investigators.

'Excuse me, and all of us, my dear Grigoriță; we knew nothing of this, otherwise we would have left everything and come to pay our last respects to your revered father!' murmured Baloleanu with a sorrowful expression, giving him a prolonged handshake.

The others, assuming suitably mournful expressions, also shook his hand in turn, endeavouring to show by their glances that they could not find words equal to their grief.

It was Grigore Iuga who felt that he should apologize for failing to notify Baloleanu. But as he opened his mouth to speak, the prefect pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it to his eyes, as if to

hold back his tears, and the gesture seemed so artificial that Grigore changed his mind, and continued on his way after the few seconds of delay, hastening to catch up with the wagons, which had not paused.

The procession soon entered the churchyard. The priest continued to sing for some moments, and then the coffins were lowered in turn into the open tomb, next to which stood the three servants sent on by Bumbu, the steward, to remove carefully and later replace the stone slab which covered it. Other manor servants now had to assist them, as the coffins were heavy. The priest repeated several times: 'May their spirit live for ever' accompanied by the murmurs of the chanter. Then he suddenly ceased, bowing humbly in the direction of Grigore, who, standing motionless, gazed emptily ahead. At a sign from the steward, the three men began to shovel in the earth. Baloleanu and the others once more expressed sincere condolences, to which Grigore listened quietly, merely nodding slightly in acknowledgment. Nevertheless, he clearly heard Major Tănăsescu's aside to the inspector: 'As we are here already, and the priest is at hand, better bury the peasants in the village cemetery. I don't know where it is, but the priest will tell you. You'll find the mayor there. Go on, my dear fellow, let's deal with this formality, too! . . . But you know, quickly, without a lot of ceremony. That, would be too good for these villains! . . . Don't forget the ones we just executed at the village hall!'

Grigore started, as if he had remembered a very important matter, and quickly said to Titu: 'I would have liked to be at the funeral of the peasants, but I don't feel myself capable, now . . . Would you mind going in my place?'

'Of course I will!' young Herdelea answered.

The priest accompanied Titu and Corbuleanu. They passed out of the churchyard, through two gardens and an orchard. The stiffened grimacing corpses, lying as death had come to them, were now lined up in two rows in the cemetery. A long, wide common grave had been dug alongside.

'Now quickly, man, we have no time!' Inspector Corbuleanu urged the priest.

He stood as if on tenterhooks, fidgeting impatiently during the short service, watching the bodies thrown into the common grave, and then went, without looking back.

Titu Herdelea was left with the priest, looking on silently while the lumps of sticky earth fell on the bodies which had been flung pell-mell into the pit, and now lay like a pile of rotten branches, and watching the dead gradually settle into their final resting place, mixing and mingling with the earth which hid them from all danger. ●●

'How much they have sacrificed for the soil, and now the soil swallows them all!' murmured Titu Herdelea, his heart constricting. 'And to think that all our efforts are fated to end like this!'

Ten panting peasants sweated mutely with the spades. Mayor Pravilă urged them on, frightened, as if the buffets he had received at the hands of the major had sent him out of his wits altogether.

'How many were there, mayor?' Titu asked, when the earth had engulfed them all.

'Forty-six, sir, including Trifon and Toader, whom we brought just now from the village hall,' the mayor answered, speaking with confidence, as he had been present when Titu had had his clash with the major. 'Father Nicodim is still at his home. It's true the major beat Niculina, but in the end he relented and did not tell us to take him from his house. It would have been a shameful thing to throw him in with these poor souls; he had done nothing wrong at all; he had just read the prayers over boyar Miron's body, and . . . Oh Lord protect and shield us, a great burden has fallen on us!'

After a pause young Herdelea spoke again: 'Tell me, mayor, what was this revolution? . . . How did you come to do so many unlawful things, so much wrecking and wickedness?'

'Well, sir, the people got heated and sinned against the law!' Pravilă answered bitterly. 'But it doesn't seem to me that things are right as they are now either. The people are the people, and it's not surprising if they make a mistake, but the boyars are wise, and . . .'

Titu did not answer, but turned his eyes towards the grave-diggers who struggled with the soil of the dead. The mayor suddenly became dumb as if recollecting himself and fearing he had said too much.

Grigore had invited Baloleanu, Grecescu and the officers to dine at the Manor. The prefect delivered a short, improvised speech in memory of the two victims of the rising which had plunged the country into ruin and mourning. Then, in order to spare their host, they said no more about those who had died, and kept the conversation solely to the brutalities and pillaging of the peasants. Observing that the young journalist from Bucharest and Grigore remained silent, Baloleanu felt himself obliged to make a rallying call for unity against the danger represented by this lost flock and by the criminal instigators who, he was certain, would be discovered.

'Petty personal ambitions must be forgotten, and small involuntary insults, provoked by abnormal circumstances, forgiven!' Baloleanu announced pompously. 'Isn't that so, Mr Herdelea?'

Titu shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate that these matters were not important. Grigore looked at Baloleanu in surprise, unable to gather his meaning.

'Oh, didn't he tell you about it?' enquired the prefect, amazed.

'Why, gentlemen, here is a fine, tactful spirit! One recognizes it immediately!'

Whereupon, having outlined the incident to Grigore, he gave a toast to forgetting the whole affair. Major Tănăsescu shook hands with Titu across the table, accompanied by the admiring applause of all. Everyone then did his best to explain to the young visitor from Transylvania that all peasants were evil and wicked, only brute force could prevent them from committing the vilest of crimes.

'We must not forget that we are under a roof in double mourning, pillaged and burned!' said Major Tănăsescu, in a dulcet voice, with unctuous indignation.

'It is sufficient to look around to see their savagery!' said Corbulcanu, twirling his moustache as if ladies were present.

The Chief Prosecutor, Grecescu, who was taciturn by nature, arrested the attention of all by recounting how such revolts had been crushed in other countries, remarking that the few lashes applied to the backs of this nation's barbarians were nothing but inoffensive parental taps compared with the manner in which such revolts had been put down elsewhere.

Titu Herdelea's anger was aroused by this conversation. He felt that the gentlemen were wrong, but could not formulate his objections into a convincing reply.

'Only injustice offends me!' he cried several times, as if by this he wanted to show his disagreement.

Later, inspired by the heat of discussion, he declared with a confidence which amazed even himself: 'I understand and admit any punishment, on one condition: it must be just and legal. You, who represent the state, and have at your disposal the power of the state, cannot permit yourselves to be guilty of the same fault as the peasants, who have trampled law underfoot and committed crimes. If you trample on the law, you too commit crimes and yours are even more heinous, because you commit them in the name of the state, and abuse its power. When the peasants rose and acted illegally, they risked meeting the strength of the state, the army and the police, coming to punish them at any moment. You, instead of keeping to the law, insult and torture defenceless people, because you know that nobody will come to punish you!'

'My dear friend, my dear friend!' Baloleanu smiled indulgently, 'I am a just and law-abiding man! But, the state not only has the right, but also the duty, of defending its existence by any means once it is threatened! Any contribution to maintaining and strengthening the state is legal and just!'

'That's what a Hungarian police officer said to me!' Titu replied ironically. 'The only difference was that he spoke Hungarian and you speak Rumanian!'

'But we can't possibly permit revolution . . .'

'It is law which overcomes revolution. Only unlawful behaviour causes revolutions and spreads them!' announced Titu, with the pride of one who has made a great discovery.

4

On the morning of the next day a procession of some fifty peasants started off for Pitești, accompanied by an escort of soldiers with rifles at the ready, under the command of a vicious old sergeant. Those who had been proved guilty and those who were suspected of having committed crimes and of playing a leading part in the revolt had been put in irons and walked in pairs connected by one long, heavy chain. Several of the soldiers carried thick staves to urge on the pace of any who lingered.

Early in the afternoon Baloleanu, Grecescu and Major Tănăsescu made their farewells to Grigore, with whom they had lunched. They were going, as the prefect put it, to examine the effects of the pacification in all the villages which had caught the infection of revolt, especially as they had received confidential reports that in some villages, when the landlords had returned under the protection of the army, finding their property pillaged they had started to investigate, judge and execute the supposed offenders all on their own.

'This is impermissible!' exclaimed Baloleanu, with righteous indignation. 'I cannot tolerate reprisals! What would happen if everybody started to administer justice just as the fancy took him? The law must be applied impartially to all!' Here he met the mocking glance of young Herdelea. 'Defence of the general interest is one thing, defending personal interests, flouting the law and taking revenge is quite another!'

Titu left next day. Grigore would have kept him longer if it had not been for the circumstances prevailing in the country; all was misery, suffering and ruin. It would have meant selfishness rather than friendship.

'It has been very kind of you to have stayed with me during these days of danger and trial,' young Iuga said to Titu as they parted. 'I don't want to abuse your friendship . . . Thank you. I will never forget the genuine solicitude with which you understood and supported all my moods and silences! As a matter of fact I shan't stay here too long myself. The isolation and the shadows haunting the atmosphere would give me a mental breakdown. But I must give orders for the field work, which hasn't started yet, and for what repairs are possible.'

In the same yellow chaise, still with Ichim up in front, Titu left Amara. The road remained empty, as if the people did not dare to leave their houses or hiding-places. The yard of the village hall was still filled with peasants crouching face downwards on the earth and guarded by soldiers, while the investigation continued with equal zeal; the investigators alone had been changed; Captain Lache Grădinaru had taken the place of the major, and Sergeant Boiangiu that of the prosecutor.

On the way to Costești every village showed the same signs of investigations. At Costești station Titu met Cosma Buruiană who pressed him for details about the state of affairs in Amara, and said that he was going back home tomorrow, alone for the time being, until he could be sure that all danger had passed.

In Bucharest the first thing Herdelea did was to go to Gogu Ionescu's. Although he felt uncomfortable at having to take such tidings, he told himself that after Grigore's laconic telegram, the details he could fill in would be something of a consolation. When he had come to see if the boyars were at home six months ago, he had been intimidated and moved. The house in Strada Argintari, with its impressive flight of steps, protected by their glass shell, had then seemed so happy and gay. But now it somehow looked sad, although the rays of the setting sun warmed its walls and played on the windows, and in the small garden, with its neat paths, plots of tender young grass made pale green velvet carpets. He found only Eugenia at home. She made him tell her everything before Gogu arrived, receiving his news with horror, more particularly at the thought of the suffering it would cause her husband. It was she who had prevented him going to Nadina's funeral at Amara, for she had been afraid that something might still happen there. Gogu soon joined them. In the few days which had passed since Titu had seen him last, he seemed to have aged ten years. He had forgotten all his dandyism and lost his joviality. As soon as his eyes met Titu's he began to sob uncontrollably like a woman. Only now did he realize how much he had loved Nadina; more than a sister, as if she had been his own child. While he listened to Titu, who had to repeat the story, he continually sighed: 'Poor father! . . . How will he take the news?' Old Tudor Ionescu kept asking whether Nadina, the darling of his weak old heart, had returned from the country, because he too had heard that the revolt had spread to Argeș.

In the evening, at dinner, Titu Herdelea had to tell the Gavrilaș couple everything that had happened to him and all that he had seen in the country. Thus he went to bed late, and only then did he look at the afternoon newspapers, smiling grimly when he read that thanks to the wise measures taken by the new government the disturbances had been quelled without bloodshed almost

everywhere. It seemed an outrage, and his soul seethed with repressed revolt. He dreamt that he was back in Amara, in the yard of the village hall, in the midst of the prostrate crowd; the major was striking off the bent heads with a blunted sword, rusty with blood. As the sword rose above a child, whose screams rent the air, he threw himself upon the major, tearing the sword from his hand and flinging it away. 'I arrest you! I arrest you!' the major roared. Titu felt himself seized by angry soldiers and the whip began to lash his face.

Next day, at *Drapelul*, Roşu embraced him as if he had risen from the dead, taking him to Deliceanu to describe the pacifying methods of the new government. The secretary, always anxious to boost the newspaper by a sensational story, thought of printing the young reporter's impressions, including the clash with the bloody-minded major.

'No, no, Roşu!' the editor interrupted. 'We have a moral obligation to give our support to the re-establishment of order. We must respect our promise! We cannot be as criminally double-faced as they were!'

'Very well!' Roşu answered. 'I expected as much. *Drapelul* is doomed to vegetate for ever!'

Some days later, during which Titu had regularly presented himself at the office each morning, he found Roşu even more gloomy than usual. First he thought that the secretary must have some personal grief, and left him to himself. The young man sat down and began to compose the usual colourless little items he was becoming used to. Eventually the secretary burst out on his own: 'What a terrible thing! . . . What a vile act! . . . What barbarity!'

These dramatic explosions were not in his line. His voice sounded flat, like that of a bad actor. As if realizing this, he fell silent once more, but after a further quarter of an hour resumed sarcastically: 'Well, my dear boy, what of our revolution now? . . . It's finished, hasn't it? . . . We've crossed it off, haven't we? And how thoroughly, too – thousands of crosses!'

As was his habit, Titu walked over to show his interest: 'I take it you've observed that the Peasant Disturbances column has almost disappeared from the newspapers? . . . So the repression must have been efficacious. Quiet has been re-established over the whole country. But what sort of quiet? Thousands of new graves show that perfect order reigns in Rumania once more!'

Then, after a short pause, his face flushed with indignation, he went on: 'What you saw in Argeş, my dear boy, was a drawing-room affair compared with the crude barbarities let loose in other Rumanian villages since they took power! Those who were shot or executed during the repression are fortunate, for they escaped the

torture meted out to the living . . . To put it in a few words, it has been a bloodbath, something unheard-of in our era, even in colonies or among savage tribes. And everything was done quietly, so that Europe and the rest of the world should not hear. The cannon roared and wiped out whole villages, and the rifles rattled incessantly . . . The victims have been thrown into common graves, without any cross, so that no sign should be left. Nobody can protest, nobody dares to utter as much as a sound, because the country's interests are at stake, and they demand that so many million peasants should toil, racked with hunger and cold, in order to provide riches for a few thousand idlers to lavish on luxury and extravagance!

'And to think one isn't even free to write it down!' said young Herdelea. 'I would protest if I knew where!'

'It's just as well you can't; they'd soon finish you off: you'd be expelled from the country like any undesirable alien!'

'I? A foreigner? In Rumania?' Titu smiled with ironical superiority.

'You mustn't forget, my dear boy, that you're not a Rumanian citizen, however much you may feel that you're a truer Rumanian than the rest! As soon as you endangered public order, you would cease to be a brother, you'd become an enemy, and so . . . But don't worry! . . . In a week or two only the courts will remember yesterday's revolt when they judge the tens of thousands of peasants who have been brutally dragged from all parts, and fill all the prisons in the country . . . Apart from that, everybody has done very nicely, and is content. Those who were plundered will be richly recompensed by the state to refurbish and even improve their estates, and the peasants, if they behave themselves, will get a new shower of speeches, promises and empty words, because we mustn't forget that parliament will soon dissolve, and new elections be held.'

True enough, after some ten days not even Roşu mentioned the peasant disturbances any more. The newspapers grew more and more heated discussing the forthcoming elections. Only here and there, and especially in the party press, the detection and punishment of the agitators was demanded. The coming of spring roused a new zest for life. Outdoor restaurants prepared to open. Cafés and public houses took over the pavements for their tables. On Calea Victoriei, between the boulevard and the palace, beautiful women became youthful again in charming frocks, members of both sexes strolled in the streets looking for amorous adventures, and the usual whispers of 'My love' and 'sweetie' were heard on the pavements.

Titu Herdelea spent little time in his room, although it was pleasant and homely. But one afternoon, which he had decided to

devote to a good book, he found himself confronted by Mrs Alexandrescu and a smiling Mimi. The young man was taken aback. His ex-landlady told him that she had been in the neighbourhood, and had wanted very much to see him again, so she called in passing. She had not forgotten him, he had always been so polite, but in particular Mimi had badgered her, saying: 'Come along, mother, let's see if he's forgotten me.' She then mentioned Jenică, cursing him and saying that he was a villain, for he had behaved like any common fellow, sending his doddering old father to announce the end of the affair, but she'd given them all the length of her tongue so that they'd remember her in their graves! Mimi, poor soul, had not been able to stand that Jean from the beginning, he had been so taken up with his own charms, and had not received the genteel upbringing that Mimi had from her mother. But she, innocent and honest as she was, had ignored her daughter and believed in him. What she regretted most now was that because of the villain and his consumptive sister she had parted two loving hearts; Mimi, the darling, had told her, good mother that she was, quite openly from the first: 'Mummy, he's frightfully attractive!' and then had repeated more times than there were fishes in the sea: 'I love him, Mummy. I love him!' And at last God had granted that Mimi was free, while she herself had got rid of Jenică, and . . .

'So now come on - give each other a kiss, come on, I won't look!' Mrs Alexandrescu ended abruptly. "

Mimi clasped her arms round Titu's neck, rubbing her lips against his. Young Herdelea, at a loss and embarrassed at the whole scene, muttered a few polite words, whereupon he became even more confused. Finally Mrs Alexandrescu invited him over to see them. When they left, Mimi lingered behind, pressing herself against him and whispering in languishing tones: 'Make sure you come, my pet!'

This incident prompted Titu to go and see Tanța who lived with her parents behind the station the very next day. He had not seen her since his return from the country, two weeks ago. She had not appeared, and he had not dared to look for her. The whole family made him very welcome, and Tanța, rosy with happiness, was surprised and joyful. Jean shook hands with him easily as if they had only parted yesterday. The conversation mostly turned on Jenică's wedding, which was planned to take place a few weeks after Easter, and Titu was invited by the young man to be one of his *cavaleri de onoare*,¹⁹ at the ceremony. Titu agreed on condition that he should be partnered by a nice young bridesmaid, that was to say, Tanța. Mrs Ionescu's eyes moistened, while even old Ionescu managed to produce a smile.

It was three weeks before Grigore Iuga arrived in Bucharest.

Although he wore a weary expression, a new confidence shone in his eyes.

'Of course, all those who had fled have gone back,' he answered Titu's inquiry. 'Platamonu, too, but without his mutilated son, who probably lies in some nursing home . . . Only the dead will return no more.'

Desiring to distract him, Titu tried to change the subject, but Grigore continued quietly: 'We've begun and ended the spring sowing! . . . The people have returned to the fields as if the episode of the revolt was only an ugly dream. Work has been resumed with more energy, in a sort of silent desperation . . . But unfortunately almost a quarter of the peasants are in prison in Pitești. All the cellars of public buildings in the town have become prison cells. We never learn anything from any tragedy . . . To say nothing of the fact that to be short of so many hands in the present circumstances is a great loss also to the country's economy! . . . Still . . . We're doing our best to wipe out the traces of the hurricane and nature herself helps us too. There is a wave of new life everywhere. The trees are blossoming in the woods and the orchards. Spring has laid her garment over the ruins from the fires, the charred remnants and the ashes . . .'

'And the people?' Titu asked.

'God alone knows!' Grigore answered. 'I got the impression whenever I spoke to a peasant who had been beaten – and every one of them had – that they regret nothing, on the contrary . . . In each mind one single question remains, which no repressions can smother: "How can we live without land?"'

5

Grigore held long agricultural consultations with Victor Predelcanu. Now that he was, by the will of fate, the sole master of the Amara estate, he wanted to put his plans for re-organization into practice. What he needed above all was an honest and skilful agricultural expert, who would be a loyal colleague on whom he could rely in any eventuality. He planned to settle in Bucharest, like Predelcanu, going to the country only during the busy seasons. He had no intention of rebuilding the ruined villa. If the need arose, he would modernize the old manor, which had been spared the fury of the flames.

Predelcanu made enquiries, searched and found the very man for him; a pleasant, lively, intelligent and handsome young man, with several years' experience of farming in Germany, who had got good results there as the director of a big model farm owned by the state.

'Here he is! His name is Stelian Halunga . . . Do you like him?' enquired Predeleanu, introducing the young farmer.

'Yes, I do!' Grigore smiled, 'and I hope we shall be good friends!'

Before leaving for Amara to install the new manager Grigore wanted to clear up several questions which, precisely because they were remnants of the past, might have confusing results in the future. He had to discuss the question of Nadina's grave with Gogu Ionescu. As she had only remained his wife nominally, because a small formality had not been carried out, he did not feel justified in deciding anything about her himself. Although still inconsolable, Gogu felt that as fate had taken her to the country in those dangerous days, her soul, that had been so restless in this life, would have no greater tranquillity anywhere than the place where death had come to her. When she had been dead three months, and the usual remembrance ceremony was held, they would all go to the country. At the same time he intended to sell his estate, and also perhaps Nadina's at Babaroaga. Events had shaken him too much and he would never have the heart to live and feel at home in the place where the brutes had killed his sister.

'Then sell it to the peasants!' said Grigore. 'They've paid enough in blood for at least the right to buy it!'

'Oh no, no!' exclaimed Gogu in horror. 'I don't want to have anything to do, no contact at all with peasants any more, not even in business. What I would like would be to sell it to a bank, which could divide it among them if it cared to do so. It's useless, my dear Grigoriță, I haven't got the same ties with the soil and the peasants as you have. I'm a real townsman; maybe that's why I shall never forget, let alone forgive, their crimes which have broken my heart!'

Grigore had visited Dumescu several times at the Rumanian Bank. The latter, in memory of his friendship with Miron Iuga, had offered to help him through his financial difficulties. The young man did not want to accept any compensation from the state, unlike those other victims who now crowded to beg, and exaggerated their losses to profit by the calamity. Out of everything which he had lost, only the villa had been insured. Nevertheless, if the company carried out the contract, and paid the damages according to the value, he would clear his debt at the bank; and would also be able at least to mend the outhouses and equipment. Dumescu suspected, however, that insurance companies would not be paying out, as they would consider the revolt a case of *force majeure*, thus cancelling their obligations. It would be a good thing if the government came out with a law clearing up the complications caused by these exceptional circumstances. In any case, he, Dumescu, would personally enquire into the matter.

Grigore then put in a word at the Metropolitan's Palace and

obtained agreement that Father Nicodim's son should be appointed to the vacant place in Amara, thus fulfilling the old priest's life-long desire, even if only after his death. In fact, the young man had already hastened home from far away Gorj, where his parish was situated, to officiate at his father's funeral and help Niculina until Filip, who was imprisoned with the rest at Pitești, was released.

In order to contribute to calming the spirits of the people, Grigore, on his way with the new manager, stopped in Pitești to do something about liberating at least Dragoș the teacher.

It was hard to persuade Prefect Baloleanu, who was of the opinion that the revolt, especially in Argeș, had been the work of agitators and was most anxious to unearth them, thus serving his party which certain anarchistic newspapers were already accusing of being morally responsible for the tragic events. He had been informed that Dragoș was the most dangerous agitator. Only after two days of insistence and discussion was he prevailed upon to let the teacher go and then only on Grigore's personal guarantee.

Amara resumed its usual appearance. Busuioc the innkeeper, his hat on the back of his head and his stomach protruding, again stood in his doorway bandying words with those who passed by. Ion Praviță, the mayor, came even more often to knock back a pot of plum brandy to restore his energy in facing the innumerable problems which had arisen out of the revolt.

'What about the people, Mr Mayor?' the innkeeper asked. 'Will they let them go, or will they be kept to rot in the jails?'

'Well, Cristache, if they wouldn't listen to me . . .' the mayor replied carefully. 'They went mad, and only came to their senses when the harm had been done. Now only Master Grigoriță can take pity and save those in prison, as he did Mr Nică.'

'But what about damages? Are they going to make them good, or shall we get nothing?' Cristache continued, for he had put his name down as a claimant both here and in Pitești, hoping thus to obtain a goodly sum to make up for his tribulations.

'There, too, our only hope is Master Grigoriță!' said Praviță. 'From now on only his kind heart can help us!'

In the mayor's office, Dumitrescu the clerk was working, smothered in papers, for the mayor was busy at the police station and the Manor. Sergeant Boiangiu would have continued the investigations for a twelve-month if Grigore had not advised him to stop and ~~can~~ down.

'When I told you that Amara was a village of thieves you didn't believe me!' Boiangiu would often say reproachfully to the mayor. 'Now you've seen for yourself! . . . But leave it to me, from now on I'll look after them!'

The old manor seemed to have regained its youth, standing

amidst a frame of blossoming trees with its new coat of whitewash. The ruins of the villa had been cleared away, and in its place flower-beds gave the grounds a more ample, friendly appearance. Halunga, the manager, was running the estate as if he had been doing it all his life. He inspired the peasants with confidence by his kindly words and warm-hearted ways, suitable to the circumstances, and by the example of hard work and energy which he gave. Only Isbăşescu, busy with his wrecked ledgers, felt wounded and despised, considering that a position had been usurped which he alone deserved according to all custom and justice, especially as he had suffered so much through his loyalty to old Iuga. Thus his eyes followed the new manager with secret enmity.

On Sundays Grigore called the peasants to the Manor and personally heard their complaints and troubles. They were still the same old complaints, but now made with more reserve: the shortage of maize, the burden of debt, and the need for land. Nobody even mentioned any event connected with the revolt, and when he asked, he usually received the same answer: 'People got heated, Master Grigoriță, that's how it was fated!'

Lupu Chirițoiu alone dared to say once: 'The hour of justice hasn't come yet, Master Grigoriță. But it must come one of these days, because the world cannot live without justice!'

Cosma Buruiană was always coming to seek advice and assistance and in particular to complain. All his hopes rested in the compensation from the state, otherwise he would have been beside himself; the peasants had carried away even the very ashes from his hearth. It was from him that Grigore learnt that in a moment of rage Colonel Ștefănescu had himself shot three Vlăduța peasants who had been proved to have set fire to the manor.

At the end of May, after Halunga had familiarized himself with matters in Amara, Grigore left for Bucharest once more, saying that his presence was now needed in the capital, to be near Dumescu and speed up the solution of the financial questions. In his heart, however, he admitted that something more important drew him to Bucharest, so important that his whole future depended on it.

Nevertheless, once there, he let day after day pass without daring to do anything about settling it. He busied himself with small matters, as if deliberately postponing larger affairs. His calls at the Predeleanu's were less frequent, on the pretext of being engaged on serious business connected with Amara. Since the dissolution of parliament early in June, Balotănu had relinquished his prefecture to stand as a candidate in the elections, resuming his residence in the capital. Grigore saw him almost every day, as he had once seen the Predeleanu's. Those visits, however, were not prompted by any renewal of affection, for since his duties as a prefect had ceased, the

lawyer had resumed his radical theories regarding the peasant problem, and once again rolled out empty sentences which annoyed Grigore.

'Our first bill must be a general amnesty, which will heal the wounds of the recent tragedy and bring true peace to all souls!' said Baloleanu one day with lordly dignity. 'Our hearts bled when we were forced to restore order in the country, but now, my dear Grigoriță, we can dispense justice as well! The thousands of wretches filling the prisons must be allowed to return to their homes, repentant and reformed, in order to resume their work in the interests of Rumania's progress!'

Grigore was anxious to make use of Baloleanu's services to obtain a position for Titu, who, on learning from Roșu of his true situation at *Drapelul*, was in despair lest he should be turned out into the streets. Finally, through the offices of the secretary-general at the Ministry of Crown Lands the lawyer secured him a place in the Dobrogea Department there.

'What will my duties be?' Titu asked, moved, when Grigore had called him to Baloleanu's to tell him the good news personally.

'You have to call once a month to take your salary!' Baloleanu cried jovially. 'And write poems, if you still can! Or get married, if you want to!'

Young Herdelea blushed, as if his soul's innermost secret had been laid bare. Nevertheless, he had the presence of mind to retort: 'I think the second suggestion would be more appropriate for Mr Iuga!'

Grigore answered after a pause, almost gravely: 'After all, that might not be a bad thing . . .'

6

About the middle of June, with nothing settled, Grigore decided to go back to Amara and not to return to Bucharest before the autumn. Before he left, he called to say good-bye to the Predeleanus. Victor was alone, Tecla and Olga had gone out shopping. After discussing various topics, especially the losses the Predeleanus had suffered in Delga - which, in fact had not been very sizeable - Grigore, changing the subject, abruptly enquired.

'Do you think Olga would like to be my wife, Victor? But please answer frankly, don't spare my feelings, because . . .'

Predeleanu smiled saucily: 'Well, what does she think? Have you asked her?'

Grigore then blurted out that he loved her very much, and had fought with himself in vain; he was tired of this life and wanted to start afresh . . .

Predeleanu let him ease his heart, listening with the gravity appropriate to such occasions.

'Now listen to me, Grigoriță, my dear fellow,' he said finally. 'You say you want to go to Amara tomorrow. Postpone your departure for twenty-four hours; Olguța leaves for home the day after tomorrow. You can accompany her to distract her on her journey, and even go and see her parents in Craiova. Somehow I have a feeling that you won't regret it.'

The train was due to leave at five. Grigore was at the station at four o'clock. Titu came first, with a small bunch of white flowers. In a moment of elation Grigore had told him the previous day, as they ate together, that he was very happy; he loved Miss Postelnicu. Young Herdelea wanted to be the first to congratulate Olguța, at least with flowers, for discretion would not allow him to put anything into words as yet. He also wanted to tell Grigore of his great joy yesterday, after they had parted, when Deliccanu—pressed by Roșu, of course—had told him that he should stay on at *Drapelul* at the same salary, because the newspaper needed his services. With a gleam of confidence in his eyes, young Herdelea exclaimed: 'From now on I don't care about anything . . . The day before yesterday I felt like a piece of dirt, and now today here I am with two salaries! I've got luck, there's no denying it!'

He had called on Tanța to tell her his good fortune. She had accompanied him to the station. Now she was waiting for him in a confectioner's shop in Calcea Griviței and they were going to spend the rest of the day together.

As Titu chatted enthusiastically and Grigore waited impatiently, a train pulled into the station. Among the crowd hurrying towards the exit, Grigore recognized Ilie Rogojinaru, the lease-holder from Olcna. Young Iuga turned his head away nervously, but the lease-holder caught sight of him and hurried up beaming and perspiring, a suitcase in his hand: 'Do you remember me, sir?' he asked, putting the suitcase down, and wiping his face and bald head with a huge handkerchief. 'I've heard and read about what you've suffered!' he went on in a different tone, nodding sadly.

Wordily, he expressed his regret at the deaths of Miron Iuga and Nadina, and enquired whether much damage had been suffered, whether any compensation had been paid, and whether many peasants had been killed, continually interrupting himself to make the same observation: 'Didn't I always tell you that the peasants are villains? You remember?'

Then he proceeded to tell with gusto all the details of how he had been able to save his property. If he had been only one day late, after he had met them in the train, he would have found only dust and ashes awaiting him. The peasants in Dolj, who were more

devilish, had already begun to fire the manors and to pillage. They had gone to his place, too: 'It was sir this, and sir that, and give us the estate, because otherwise it'll be death for you, and then what do you think I did? Why shouldn't I be cleverer than the villains?' So he had agreed to willingly hand over the estate, with everything on it, to be divided among them as they wished, and he had pledged himself to pay damages to the owner if he should put in a claim. In order to make absolutely sure, they had even drawn up, sealed and signed a contract, at the village hall. In return, the peasants had allowed him to stay in the manor until the revolution was over. Within two days the army had arrived and given them land and to spare! Here he laughed complacently, adding: 'And that's how I came clean out of it, sir, escaping the fury of the villains!'

Grigore, angered by the lease-holder's laughter, remarked coldly: 'If we learn nothing even from this tragedy, then . . .'

Rogojinaru interrupted him irritably: 'What is there to learn, sir? To rein them in tighter, or to let them loose to butcher us, as they had begun to do already? No, no, sir! Throw the theorizing books into the fire, and begin to see the peasants as they really are, and as they have now shown themselves to be. Let them work; don't let them get used to waiting for the state to give them what they can't earn together by their own labour! Don't think that the peasant will ever be satisfied; if you give him land free tomorrow, he will demand cattle free too, and then money as well. There will be always something!'

'As things turned out, they were given bullets!' Grigore muttered gloomily.

'Maybe you would like them to have been presented with hot pies and official congratulations?' the lease-holder cried, thrusting out his chest. 'I'm sorry! If you, who have suffered as no-one else, can speak like that, what can we expect from others who . . .'

At this point, to Grigore's joy, the Predeleanu appeared, and Rogojinaru was left muttering alongside his suit-case. Olga thanked Titu for the flowers.

'A poet never lets his reputation down!' cried Predeleanu, shaking young Herdelea by the hand.

'Especially if it is for such a charming young lady!' the young man replied, hat in hand, and casting an admiring glance at Grigore.

Mrs Tecla Predeleanu was the most moved of all. She regretted that she had not brought her children along as well to see Olga off, although in a couple of days they too would be going to the country, stopping on their way for a short stay at Craiova. Grigore, happy and confused, smiled all the time, without looking at Olga.

• 'Come along now, get into the carriage, there are only three minutes left!' Predeleanu said.

'I hope you will come down to Amara again!' Grigore said to Titu.

'If you will have me, I shall always be glad to!' young Herdelea answered, embracing him and Olga in one glance.

The train began to move so imperceptibly that the motion could not be felt. Olga and Grigore smiled out of the same window to those remaining on the platform, all repeating one refrain: Good bye! . . . Good bye.'

The voices mingled, faded and then were lost in the growing hubbub of the world around them.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

- ¹ *pogon* The English equivalent of this land measurement is one and one fifth acres.
- ² *braga* A drink made from fermented rye and honey.
- ³ *Transylvania* At this time, the Rumanian province of Transylvania formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The population, however, was mostly Rumanian.
- ⁴ *Astra* A Transylvanian association for the promotion of Rumanian culture.
- ⁵ *dulceafă* Whole-fruit jam served in a small dish, together with a glass of water.
- ⁶ *doina* A traditional folk song.
- ⁷ *căciulă* A high fur-cap worn by Rumanian peasants.
- ⁸ *mămăligă* A thick porridge made from maize-flour. Until quite recently this was the main staple food of the Rumanian peasant.
- ⁹ *Michael the Brave* A ruler of the province of Wallachia in southern Rumania at the end of the sixteenth century. He was the first man who attempted to unite Rumania by bringing together the three principalities of Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia. He became king of all Rumania, but after only a few years, his venture failed, due to pressure from the Turks.
- ¹⁰ *Phanariots* Greek nobles who ruled Wallachia and Moldavia for the Turkish Empire.
- ¹¹ *surin* The title given by a father-in-law to his opposite number in the family of his son-in-law or daughter-in-law.
- ¹² *caralea* *de noapte* Usher's. In Rumanian weddings each bridesmaid is partnered by a male attendant to the bridegroom.